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At

JEZEBEL'S FRIENDS.

A NOVEL.

By DORA RUSSELL,

Author of "Footprints in the Snow," "The Broken Seal," "The Track of the Storm," etc., etc.

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JEZEBEL'S FRIENDS.

CHAPTER I.

HIDDEN.

It was a dull, dark night ; so dark that the tall cliffs round Headfort's sea-pent bay seemed but like dusky shadows in the murky air. Heedless of the gloom, a woman, carrying what to her appeared to be a heavy burden, was hurrying, about eleven o'clock, down the steep and narrow pathway which led from the rocks to the shore.

The tide was sweeping slowly in, but so deep was the gloom that she could only hear, not see, the waves break when she got to the shore. Keeping close to the foot of the cliffs, she now almost ran until she came near the centre of the wide circular bay, and then paused to breathe. Having satisfied herself that no one was near, she hastily laid down the burden which she had carried beneath her cloak—a strange burden—a long box, rolled and swathed in a woman's black gown.

To this box was tied a small spade, the string of which her trembling fingers now unfastened. With this spade she began digging vigorously in the sand.

Suddenly a vivid flash of lightning gleamed across the sky, and for an instant lit up the strange scene. Then a loud peal of thunder broke overhead, and the girl stopped in momentary terror and crouched down. The storm had begun in earnest, and heavy rain commenced to fall. Another flash, another peal, and with a sort of desperation the girl once more raised her head, and forced herself to begin her work anew. She had but one thought ; to bury her burden deep enough, that it might lie hidden until the sea gave up its dead, and the secrets of all hearts were bare.

With a kind of shudder she lifted the black-covered box, and carried it to the edge of the grave-like trench ; and, after a moment's pause, after something between a gasp and a sigh had passed her pale lips, she lowered it down into the hole, and began hastily to cover it up, pausing not until the sand above it was level with the rest.

She knelt down and with her hands flattened it ; the gleaming lights darting athwart the sky, one second showing her figure plainly, and the next vanishing away. Then the fight above grew fiercer ; the storm-clouds warring in their wrath, and the lightning leaping out in its wild play. A moment later and the world seemed ablaze. In an instant the girl, kneeling on the sand, with her face now turned towards the sea, saw as in a vast panorama the whole scene around her ; the brown shaggy rocks towering aloft ; the patches of verdure between their crests ; the rents and rifts on the huge rocks.

The next all was darkness, and a crash so loud, so terrible, that the earth seemed to shake, fell on the listener's appalled ears, who uttered a cry of terror and covered her face. Then she sprang to her feet, and overwhelmed with fear, fled homewards.

Just as she reached the top of the cliff another blinding flash of lightning showed plainly everything around. It showed this girl, rain-drenched, white-faced, with rigid features and wide open terrified eyes, to a man wrapped in a military cloak, who was walking leisurely, considering the weather, along the path at the head of the cliffs.

"Ruth Forth ! it cannot be !"

Then he began hastily to follow the flying figure of the girl before him. She had seen, but not recognised him, but she saw *someone*, and this fact made her hasten on even faster than before.

At last she stopped, where he had expected—feared—that she would stop ; before a little house in a garden, built back from the roadway. She opened the latch of the wooden gate, and he watched her go cautiously in, and disappear amid the wet evergreens. She did not go to the front door of the house, but evidently intended to enter at the back, and the man watching her saw all this with a feeling of intense anger and astonishment in his heart.

"If it had been the other one," he was thinking as he leaned a moment or two on the gate, "I should not have

wondered much, but Ruth—confound it, what can she have been after? But I'll be at the bottom of this escapade—she came up by the steps from the bay—I'll go down and try to see who she has been meeting there, for I suppose there must be someone. Ah! what trust can you have in them?" And he gave a bitter smile, shrugged his shoulders and turned away.

In the meanwhile the girl had stolen noiselessly in at the back door of the little house in the garden, which she found unlocked. Then she crept through the kitchen, and cautiously ascended the staircase, at the head of which stood a beautiful woman in a white wrapper.

They looked at each other, these two, but neither spoke. There was intense excitement depicted on the face of the beautiful woman at the head of the stairs, and she eagerly scanned the slender, cloaked form of the girl. Then she breathed a sort of a sigh of relief, and turned back, still without a word, into the bedroom, from which she had only emerged when she heard the light footstep she had watched and waited for.

The girl followed her, and then sank down on the side of the bed like one whose strength is utterly spent. The woman saw this, and hastily shut the room door, and took off the drenched cloak and poured out some brandy, which she had standing in readiness, in a glass, and held it to the girl's white lips, who looked into the other's face with eyes still full of fear.

"But—it is safe, is it not?" whispered the woman, seeing this expression with a sudden pang of dread.

"Yes," faltered the girl; "no one saw me—but oh! Frances, Frances, I would rather have died than have done what I did to-night!"

"Hush, hush," said the woman she had called Frances; "it is done and over now. Don't give way, Ruth, for Heaven's sake; don't give way now after all we have gone through!"

Suddenly Ruth gave a half cry, and sprang to her feet, while a look of absolute consternation passed over her expressive face.

"The spade, Frances!" she whispered; "I've left it behind—in my terror I forgot it. Oh! what shall we do?"

"How could you be so mad? But it can't be helped. You can't go back now, and, after all, it does not matter

much, for the sea will likely have swept it away before morning, as the tide was coming in ; and even if it hasn't, who can identify a common little spade ? ”

The young sister made no answer. She drew her lips tightly together, and forced back some words she knew would but add to her sister's anxiety. But long after Frances Forth had left her, she lay awake, pale and trembling, thinking of the forgotten spade.

“How could I? how could I?” she moaned, in bitter self-reproach, tossing uneasily on her bed. “And it may be traced—poor Frances does not know ; if it is, it will kill me, I think. I could but die.”

CHAPTER II.

COLONEL FORTH.

THE morning was fine after the storm ; one of those blue-skied, bright mornings when the air is fresh and exhilarating, and the still wet leaves glisten in the sun. And at eight o'clock precisely, Colonel Forth, the occupier of the little house in the garden in Headfort's High-street, and the father of Frances and Ruth Forth, descended to the dining-room, and frowned severely when he found that breakfast was not as ready for him as he was for breakfast.

He was a widower with two daughters, and his marriage had been a mistake. He married a handsome girl for her beauty, and the beauty had soon waned, and the poor woman had nothing left to fall back upon, for she had neither mental nor monetary attractions, and the Colonel felt that he had thrown himself away, and was not above broadly hinting this to his wife. Perhaps she took his insinuations to heart ; but she died early, and then Colonel Forth grumbled at her loss.

When he had to seek a settled home for them after he left the regiment, he fixed on Headfort, for one reason because he had an old acquaintance living in the neighborhood, for another the houses were cheap there, and for a third the place possessed a fort and a small garrison. He had been a soldier all his life, and he felt that neither he nor the girls could exist without the familiar sights and

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sounds. But he found it dull, very dull. Accustomed to active work, a strict officer, and a man who went into the smallest details about everything, he did not know what to do with his time in this quiet place.

"A confounded gossiping place, too," the Colonel designated Headfort, before he had been there a couple of months. The Forths were indeed naturally much talked of; the girls were handsome, and there were other girls who were ready to fling a stone at their new neighbors and wonder what people saw in them to admire.

"But then the old Colonel is always running after the men, and asking them to the house," they would say; and they thus accounted for the fact that the officers of the garrison were very frequently to be seen in Miss Forth's pretty drawing-room. For it was pretty, though Miss Hilliard, the banker's daughter, wondered how they could contrive to turn round in it. But Miss Hilliard lived in one of the big houses of Headfort, and naturally looked down on the dimensions of Colonel Forth's small one.

But in the meanwhile, Susan, the young housemaid of the establishment, having by the Colonel's command rapped at Miss Ruth's door, now returned to the dining-room, where her master sat fuming.

"Oh, please, sir, Miss Ruth said I was to say she would be down directly; but she has been so put about by the thunder; and, please, sir, she sent the key, and said you were to make tea, and not to wait."

"To wait! No, I should think not. Confound it," roared the Colonel, his red face turning to a vermilion tint as he snatched the key of the tea caddy from Susan's hand; and while he was proceeding to make tea for himself his youngest daughter walked into the room in a white dressing-gown, with her soft, pretty light-brown hair rolled up in a somewhat disorderly knot at the top of her head.

"I am sorry I am late, father," she said, in a sweet low-toned voice; "but the storm last night frightened me so."

"Absurd! Why should the storm frighten you? Ruth, is there no bacon, or eggs, or something fit to eat? Or am I expected to breakfast on dry bread?"

"I will see about it," answered Ruth, and she went into the kitchen to order her father's breakfast, and after a little while the Colonel was able to appease his appetite; paus-

ing once or twice while doing so, however, to look disapprovingly on the pretty face opposite to him.

"What's the matter with you, Ruth, this morning?" he presently asked, sharply, still eyeing his daughter. "You look as if you'd seen a ghost or something, I declare you do! You are a pretty washed-out looking creature."

"The storm was so dreadful," said Ruth, while a deep wave of color stole to the white face her father was finding fault with.

"The storm? Fiddle-de-dee! What harm could the storm do you? It's cleared the air, and a very good thing, too; I declare, you girls are no better than cowards."

"I am always afraid—I cannot help it."

"You got it from your poor mother, I believe; she was one of those nervous, ridiculous women who are afraid of everything. Was Frances afraid, too?"

"Yes, I am going to take her breakfast up now."

"Absurd! girls lying in bed to breakfast, utterly absurd: I like to see girls come down to breakfast in neat morning gowns, and not bedgowns like that white thing you've on."

"Well, I'm generally dressed, father, but I am late this morning," said Ruth.

"Late! I should think so," and the Colonel looked at his watch. "By-the-bye, Ruth, I saw Seaforth last night in the billiard-room, and he said he was going to call this morning about you and Frances driving over with him to Sudley to-morrow, so I asked him to lunch; therefore you had better see about ordering something decent, and get off that bedraggled article you are wearing."

Again Ruth blushed deeply, but this time she made no answer. Nevertheless she at once obeyed her father's orders, and presently went into the garden, and began cutting some flowers. While she was doing this, a young man in undress uniform rode past the railings in front, and on seeing Ruth in the garden, at once drew rein.

"Good morning, Miss Ruth," he said in a pleasant cheery voice, "I'm coming in to lunch by-and-bye, d'ye know? the Colonel asked me."

"I know," answered Ruth, with a bright smile and a blush, and she carried her flowers close to the railings.

"What an awful storm we had last night," continued the young man on the horse, looking with his smiling eyes at the girl's downcast face. "D'ye know, I thought of you, Miss Ruth, and wondered if you were in a fright?"

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"You might have been sure I was," answered Ruth.

"You told me you hated it; but you've got some very jolly flowe. —I wonder if you would spare one a rose?"

Ruth laughed, and her laugh was sweet and low, like her voice.

"Hello!" This was suddenly addressed to a man in a groom's dress, who was seen approaching up the street at some distance. "Here's my servant, Miss Ruth. I say d'ye think that I might let him take my horse, and come in now instead of after? It's awfully jolly in the garden here, and we can have a chat until the Colonel arrives."

"If you like, of course you can come in," answered Ruth; and the young soldier at once dismounted and flung the reins of his horse to his groom, and having opened the latch of the garden gate, was speedily walking by Ruth's side among the wet lilac bushes and laurels which grew round Colonel Forth's little house.

He had a good face, this Kenard Seaforth, whom Colonel Forth had asked to take lunch with his daughters, and whom the gossips at Headfort said he would not object to have for a son-in-law. A face which, though not absolutely handsome, impressed you favorably as to its owner's character. His features were straight, and his eyes smiling, honest, and clear. He had, moreover, a certain well-bred look, which is not easily assumed. He was tall, erect, and slim, and looked very happy as he walked by Ruth Forth's side, keeping somewhat unnecessarily close to her slender form. An only son of General Seaforth, and a senior lieutenant in the —th Regiment, two companies of which were stationed at Headfort, he was supposed to be fairly well off in this world's goods, and he was a very frequent guest at Colonel Forth's.

And it was Ruth Forth, not the beautiful elder sister, whom he admired.

CHAPTER III.

COLONEL KENYON.

THE following day Colonel Forth and his two daughters, Ruth and Frances, visited Sudley Park on the invitation

of Colonel Kenyon, their escort being Mr. Seaforth and Major Audley.

Sudley Park was one of those old ancestral homes, surrounded by great trees, planted hundreds of years ago by those whose children's children still live on and own the land. Colonel Kenyon came of a long line, and around his place hung many memories of bye-gone days. There is a nameless air of dignity somehow about these grey stone houses, where generations and generations of gently born men and women have lived and died. We can buy most of things now-a-days, old houses among them, but they never seem quite the same in fresh hands. Better men may come; truer gentlemen perhaps; for the time-worn ivied walls may have hidden evil deeds and corrupted lives. But the romance seems to die in the transfer; the glamor to pass away, when the ancient name goes and the new one echoes under the roof-tree.

"He is a good fellow," most men said of Colonel Kenyon.

"He is a darling," many gushing women said.

"He has a noble heart," the few said who could understand that unusual phenomenon.

A slight shade of disappointment passed over his face when he recognized Ruth Forth sitting by Major Audley's side, but he at once advanced to assist her from the dog-cart.

"And your sister?" he said, as he helped her down from the high seat.

"She is behind with my father and Mrs. Seaforth," answered Ruth, and at once the cloud passed away from his brow.

"The sun is smiling for us, isn't it?" he said, in that pleasant way of his. "I am so glad that you all have been able to come."

Sudley was looking its very best, and Sudley's best meant a fair picture.

Frances Forth thought this, and smiled with proud consciousness. There had been something in Colonel Kenyon's manner as he handed her down from Seaforth's dog-cart; a tenderness, an eagerness, that to her who knew so well how to read such signs, meant very much.

He escorted Frances through the house, and as they went down the terrace steps, he asked her if she would like to join the tennis players.

"I have kept one of the courts unoccupied for you," he said, "and I thought your were never coming."

She raised her charming face to his, and smiled her charming smile.

"I am not going to play to-day," smiled Frances. "I am going to be a wallflower and sit under a tree."

"But why?" asked Colonel Kenyon, who was very fond of tennis, and had set his heart upon playing with Frances.

I have slightly sprained my ankle, so I am only going to look on; but don't mind me; you play, I shall watch you."

"No, I won't play unless you do. Where will you sit?"

Frances chose her seat beneath a great oak, the mighty boughs forming a green canopy overhead, and the vast gnarled trunk a picturesque background for the fair face as she leaned her bright chestnut hair against it. Colonel Kenyon threw himself on the grassy knoll at her feet, and lay there thinking how beautiful she was, while his other guests exchanged many a subdued smile at his expense.

"He's a fool for his pains," said one: "she'll lead him a fine dance."

And there was one young passionate heart among those around rankled with jealousy, as he watched Frances Forth smile on the middle-aged man lying at her feet. This was Arthur Beaton, a young soldier who had but recently joined the army, and who had fallen madly in love, almost at first sight, with the lovely face that Colonel Kenyon also so greatly admired. He was a tall, handsome, dark young man, with marked features, and eyes that betrayed strong, impetuous feelings, and also some high aspirations and aims.

"I suppose it's my duty to go and look after the others," at last said Colonel Kenyon; "yet I never felt any duty so hard."

"I wish it was not your duty," answered Frances.

"Do you really wish that?" asked Colonel Kenyon in a low, earnest tone.

"Yes," said the sweet voice he loved to hear.

"Well, it won't always be my duty, Frances; some day we shall have time to talk together alone."

Then, after a few more words, he went away to see after his other guests. A minute later, however, she glanced back, and caught young Beaton's eager, jealous eyes. He

accepted that look as an invitation, and at once went to her side.

"Why did you not come to talk to me before?" she asked, looking up in his gloomy face.

"I have been watching you ever since you came in, wondering if you were going to say a word to me."

"And how many words do you want?" said the beautiful woman to the eager, passionate boy.

"As many as the stars."

Once more she smiled, looking at the grey, ardent eyes gazing up at her.

CHAPTER IV.

RUTH'S LOVERS.

RUTH FORTH was certainly not a coquettish girl. She was annoyed at the persistency with which Major Audley continued walking by her side, and she saw too that his presence worried Seaforth, whose sweet temper was not quite proof against what he considered Audley's somewhat unjustifiable conduct. And by way of getting rid of his senior officer, he presently suggested that they should go into the refreshment pavilion, and thither Major Audley also accompanied them.

"Suppose we go quietly away now, and so get rid of Audley?" suggested Seaforth.

Ruth was only too glad to comply. The room was pretty full, and Audley did not see them go; and only when he looked round did he perceive they had disappeared. But by this time Ruth and Seaforth had quitted the Pavilion, and were walking in a shady part of the grounds near it which joined a pretty wood.

"Has anything been worrying you lately, Miss Ruth?" he asked. "Somehow you have not seemed yourself—will you tell me?"

A little tremor passed over Ruth's frame, but she did not speak.

"I want you to understand," went on Seaforth, "there is no one I like half so well, and if you could like me a little bit——"

Still Ruth did not speak ; her head fell a little lower, and her small hand twitched, but that was all.

"And when I get my company, do you think you would marry me?—it would make me very happy."

Ruth's breast began to heave and her lips to tremble, as she listened to these words. Then quite suddenly she turned round and faced her lover, looking full at his face with her grey eyes.

"Do you really care for me very much?" she asked.

"I really do ; don't you know I do?"

"I have hoped so, I have wished so," and now her eyes fell, "but——"

"I won't hear any 'buts,' Ruth," and he bent closer, and his breath passed over her cheek ; "if you care for me, I care for you awfully, and we'll get married ; no one shall part us now."

And these simple words were sweeter to the girl's heart than any other words could be. She sat there beside him, feeling a subtle joy in that near presence ; a sense of restfulness and trust in the stronger nature, and in the knowledge that he had at last spoken of his love. "No one shall part us now," went echoing like sweet music through her soul ; "no one shall part us now."

Yet a few minutes later, a dark shadow was already stealing over her newly-found happiness. Major Audley had left the Pavilion to seek for Ruth and Seaforth, and, to his great annoyance, could not find them on the crowded lawn.

He went into the shady, silent wood, and saw, without being seen, a girl and a young man sitting side by side, saw him stoop down and kiss the sweet up-raised face, and at that sight a pang, fierce, dark and vindictive, shot through Major Audley's heart.

"Ah, my little lady," he thought, with curling lip, "I'll soon stop all this," and he turned away with a lowering brow, and as he did so, Ruth gave a little shudder, she knew not why.

CHAPTER V.

PARENTAL PLEASURE.

WITHOUT unnecessary delay, Colonel Kenyon visited Frances Forth at her father's house, hoping she had enjoyed her visit of the previous day.

"Yes," she said, "I am always happy with you."

"Are you really?" exclaimed the delighted soldier. Then, impetuously, "Frances, will you be my wife, the darling of my home?"

"Yes," she said, drawing a long breath, and turning a little pale.

"If your father is in the house I shall speak to him at once," said Colonel Kenyon's pleasant tones; and the next moment a little tap came to the dining-room door.

"Come in," cried Colonel Forth, and an instant later Colonel Kenyon entered.

"Ah, Kenyon, is that you?" said Colonel Forth, rising, flinging down the newspaper, and holding out his red hairy hand; "I didn't hear you come in."

"I've been here more than an hour, my dear fellow," answered Kenyon; and then with a little effort he continued, "We've been old friends, and good friends, Forth; have we not?"

"There's no mistake about that," replied Forth.

"But I'm going to put your friendship to a strong test," went on Kenyon, with some emotion. "I am going to ask you to give me one whom I am sure is the greatest treasure of your home, to be the greatest treasure of mine."

Colonel Forth could scarcely conceal his delight at the prospect of getting rid of his "treasure."

"You mean——" he said, and paused.

"I mean your beautiful Frances; she has promised to be my wife, if you will give your consent, which I earnestly hope you will do. I love her very dearly, as I have loved no other, and I believe she is too pure and noble to marry me unless she gave me some return."

"Good heavens!" thought Forth, "what utter fools men in love are, to be sure."

But he only smiled grimly, and then began to consider if it would be necessary to ask his future son-in-law to dinner, and what were the probable contents of the larder.

"And when did you settle all this?" he asked, after a few moments' reflection.

"Only this afternoon. I hoped to have found an opportunity yesterday of speaking to Frances, but could find none. But something in her manner——"

"Made you think she wouldn't say no, I suppose?" said Colonel Forth, in a way that he meant to be facetious. "And what about this evening? Will you stay and take pot-luck with us, as you lovers won't like to be parted, you know, even if you run the risk of a bad dinner instead of a good one?" and again he smiled.

"I shall be delighted to stay," answered Colonel Kenyon, who would gladly have gone without any dinner to be near Frances. In an ordinary way he was a man, however, who liked a good dinner fairly well; that is he had a good appetite, and he was always pleased to see people enjoy themselves at his table.

In the meanwhile, as her father and lover talked of her, Frances had gone upstairs to tell Ruth that Colonel Kenyon was to dine with them, and to announce her engagement.

Ruth was reading when she went into the room, and the younger sister laid down her book and looked up inquiringly.

"Allow me to present to you," said Frances, with a little mocking bow, "Mrs. Kenyon, of Sudley Park!"

"No! is it possible? I believe you are joking!" answered Ruth, starting to her feet.

"I am not, I assure you; Colonel Kenyon has asked me to be his wife; I have accepted him, and our beloved father has given me his parental blessing!"

"Oh! Frances!"

Ruth caught her sister in her arms as she uttered these words, and again and again kissed her cheek. Then the two sisters for a moment looked at each other, and both their expressions changed, and with a sort of impatient sigh, Frances shook herself loose of her sister's arms.

"It's all done and settled," she said, "and there is no need to speak of what is past."

And when Colonel Kenyon left the little house, when the moonlight was shining on the lilac bushes and laburnum trees which grew around it, his heart was full of joy and love.

"I have more than I deserve," he thought tenderly, looking upwards at the luminous sky; "but I shall try to make her happy; I pray God as long as I live, that no trouble shall ever touch her life."

CHAPTER VI.

PARENTAL DISPLEASURE.

THE most unexpected things, as we all know, constantly occur, but certainly Lieutenant Kenard Seaforth received a very great and a very unpleasant surprise when he heard from his parents after he had written to tell them of his engagement to Ruth Forth.

He was an only son, and had some reason to suppose himself a dearly beloved one. He had always been on the best of terms with his father, and had never exceeded his allowance, and the general was indeed supposed to be not a little proud of his "boy." He had therefore written with happy confidence to both his father and mother. Ruth knew that he had written, and the two young people were naturally anxious for the letters which to them meant so much. Seaforth therefore first tore his father's letter hastily open, and to his consternation read as follows:—

"DEAR KENARD,—Your mother and I have received your letters announcing your engagement with Miss Forth, and I may as well tell you at once that I highly disapprove of it. I knew Colonel Forth slightly when he commanded the —th Regiment, and he was not a popular man. His daughter, or daughters, also, have not a very enviable reputation. I remember one of them in India, and though she was a handsome showy girl, she was certainly not a person I should wish to see my son's wife. You are also in no position to marry, and I should certainly not increase your allowance, even if I continued it, in the event of your carrying out your engagement with Miss Forth. In fact, my dear boy, I earnestly entreat you to get out of it as

honorably as you can. Colonel Forth is known to be a poor man, and I shall gladly advance any sum (in moderation) as an honorarium to the young lady for any disappointment she may feel. Your mother cordially agrees with me, and she will tell you more of the Indian gossip about the Miss Forths than I care to enter into.

"Trusting you will act on the advice of one to whom your welfare and happiness are of the utmost importance.

"I remain,

"Your affectionate father,

"JOHN K. SEAFORTH."

This was not a pleasant letter, it must be admitted, for a young and ardent lover to receive. Kenard Seaforth's affection for Ruth was strong and true, and was founded on the undoubted mutual sympathy which existed between them. He, therefore, felt very indignant at his father's words, and not at all inclined to be led or influenced by them. But, on the subject of his allowance, he was forced to consider. He knew very well he could not live in the regiment on his pay as an unmarried man, and that to marry on it was simply impossible. What, therefore, was he to do? he asked himself, and his heart answered that at all events he would be loyal to his love, and to his word.

Then he opened his mother's letter. This was very different handwriting to the general's bold, strong penmanship. Mrs. Seaforth was a gentle, delicate little woman, and her writing was very expressive of her nature. She commenced more affectionately than the father:—

"MY DARLING KENARD,—“Your dear father and I have both been made very unhappy by your last letter, in which you tell us you are engaged to one of Colonel Forth's daughters. Dearest Kenard, I remember Colonel Forth very well, and he was considered a most disagreeable man. I remember Miss Forth also, and I regret to say there were some very scandalous things said of her. Of course, I do not say they were all true, but still a girl is seldom very much talked of without cause. She and Lord Walter Greville of the Dragons were terribly talked of at Simla last year just before Colonel Forth retired. This was the eldest Miss Forth, I believe; but still, my dear, consider what a sad example this young girl, to whom you say you are engaged must have had ever before her eyes! My darling boy, a wife from such a family is no fit wife for you. You are sensitive,

proud, and affectionate, Kenard, and how should you like to have your wife's name spoken lightly of? Take the advice, dearest, of your loving mother, and break off this affair while there is yet time. Your father will pay any sum rather than you should be entangled in such a marriage, for money is nothing to the misery it would certainly end in. I hope some day to kiss your wife's face, for we wish you to marry, dear, if you marry suitably, but I could not bear to kiss or love Miss Forth. I do not like writing against anyone, but I feel it is my duty to do so in this case, and I remain, my darling, darling boy, ever your loving mother

"LUCY SEAFORTH."

CHAPTER VII.

MAJOR AUDLEY.

KENARD SEAFORTH'S good-looking, pleasant face flushed deeply more than once as he read his mother's letter. It was inexpressibly painful to him, for he was, as she said, sensitive, and it galled him terribly that it should have been possible for her to write such words. He quite understood, too, how this could be, for he was man of the world enough to know that Frances Forth had probably deserved a good deal of what was said of her.

But his feeling for Ruth remained untouched as he laid his mother's letter down, exactly as it had remained untouched after perusing his father's epistle.

"It is utterly unjust," he thought. "If she is not good and pure and true, then I'm a fool. But they admit they have never seen her; yet they would allow the gossip about one sister to ruin the happiness of the other."

But his parents' letters put him, to say the least of it, in a most embarrassing position.

He wrote to ask Ruth if she would meet him the same afternoon in some fields where they had sometimes met before

"You have heard from your people?" she said quickly, as they clasped each other's hands, and she looked up with heightened color and eager eyes into his face.

For she understood with unerring instinct, the moment she saw him, that he had no good news to tell.

"Yes, I've heard," he said; "and my father is not inclined to increase my allowance—it has put me out very much."

Ruth's face flushed, and a cold chill pang seemed to pass through her heart.

"If it's only about money——," she said falteringly.

"Of course it's only about money," Seaforth replied hastily, as she paused; "but if you will wait a little while, Ruth?"

"Need you ask that, Kenard?"

They were walking in a long, shady lane, "by a corn-field-side a-flutter with poppies," and looked as they went a good looking, happy young pair with long years of joy in front of them. And they were happy though in each heart was a secret source of anxiety. Seaforth could not quite forget the letters of his father and mother, and Ruth had her own private cares. Still the sweet knowledge that they loved and were beloved made both find this a pleasant hour. And as they walked on, talking as those talk between whom there is the tender tie the eye betrays, they suddenly encountered at a turn of the roadway Major Audley, who was riding, and who sharply pulled up his horse when he met them.

"Taking a country walk, Miss Ruth?" he said, as he raised his cap.

"Yes, it is such a fine day," answered Ruth, who felt she was blushing.

"Charming for ruralising. You and Seaforth seem rather fond of that kind of thing."

"I don't believe you care a bit for the country, Audley," said Seaforth, who felt somewhat nettled at the other's tone.

"Oh! don't I? Well, if you'll ride back the mare I'll have great pleasure in walking home with Miss Ruth."

"Thank you, have no wish to make the exchange," answered Seaforth, flushing.

"I dare say not. Well, Miss Ruth, I've heard a piece of news—I must congratulate you."

"And what is the news?" asked Ruth, looking up at him.

"That your sister is going to marry Colonel Kenyon. I met Colonel Forth in the village, and he told me."

"Yes ; they are engaged, I believe."

"She's a very fortunate young lady, then ; Kenyon has everything a woman's heart could desire." And he gave a little laugh.

Major Audley admired Ruth Forth, and he secretly, bitterly resented "her flirtation," as he called it, with Seaforth, which alike wounded his vanity and stimulated his love. They had been introduced to her at the same time, and the elder man, in the roving life that he had led, had been accustomed to easy conquests. But from the first Ruth evidently preferred Seaforth, and this angered Audley, who did not like his junior to be preferred before him.

And now a cruel chance had flung Ruth into his power. He believed little in men and less in women, and a hard smile crept round his coarse lips, as he thought he could now force her to do whatever he chose to ask her.

CHAPTER VIII.

A TRYST.

ON returning home Ruth's maid told her Colonel Kenyon was in the drawing-room, and added :—

"And please, miss, one of the soldier servants has just left this note for you."

Ruth took the offered note in her hand, and immediately recognised the hand-writing of Major Audley.

She at once tore it open, and her face grew very pale as she read the brief words.

"DEAR MISS RUTH,—I have got something to say to you which requires no listeners, so will you be as kind to me to-morrow as you were to Seaforth to-day ? Will you in fact meet me, where I met you with him this afternoon ? I should not venture to ask you this if I had not a grave reason for doing so ; but believe me that I have, for a secret which concerns your sister's happiness and your own has strangely enough come to my knowledge. Shall we say three o'clock for our tryst ? I shall not expect to hear from you, but to see you. With kind regards,

"Yours very sincerely,

"R. AUDLEY."

Ruth turned faint and cold while she read Major Audley's note, and she finished it and then re-read it, she absolutely leaned against the banister for support. What could he mean? Then suddenly a memory flashed across her brain, which sent a quick dart of violent pain and terror through her heart. She remembered on the night of the storm, as she had struggled up the steep path from the bay, that when she had reached the highest step a vivid flash of lightning had showed her for a moment the figure of a man approaching her, and that she had fled on more quickly in consequence. Could this have been Major Audley?

And she remembered, too, with fresh fear, something he had said at Colonel Kenyon's garden party; that he had kept a secret for her, and therefore that she should not have grudged him a rose. And there had been something in his manner, too—a shade of suppressed insolence, the very recollection of which now brought a burning blush to her pale cheeks.

As one miserable image after the other passed through her brain, she heard Colonel Kenyon leave the house, and a few moments later Frances came gaily into the room and held out her white and slender hand as she approached Ruth.

"See, my dear," she said, "part of my price!"

Then Ruth looked up and saw the glittering ring on the third finger in token of the troth plight.

And Ruth sat still, and thought her bitter thoughts, tried to determine what to do, and could see no way out of her terrible dilemma. If she refused to meet Major Audley, she did not know what ill in his anger he might do; and if she did meet him, Seaforth might hear of it and believe her to be both false and deceitful.

But she was afraid of Audley, and dare not run the risk of offending him. At last she decided it was better to hear what he had to say. And when the next morning dawned, after a restless and miserable night, she still kept to this resolution.

Then the question rose in her mind:—Should she leave any message with Frances or the maid if Seaforth should chance to call? She asked herself this again and again, and finally decided to leave it to chance. She had seen him yesterday, and they had not settled when they should meet again. Therefore, he probably would not come to-

day ; and without saying anything to Frances, who would no doubt think she was going on some housekeeping business, she quietly left the house about a quarter to three o'clock, and soon found herself approaching the lane where but yesterday she had been so happy.

CHAPTER IX.

THE SECRET.

BUT now Ruth did not look at the fields of green waving corn, or the scarlet poppies ; she walked quickly on with bent head and fast-beating heart, and presently on one of the gateways into the fields she saw Major Audley sitting on the topmost rail of a gate, smoking a cigar. He threw this away, and jumped down immediately he saw her, and at once walked forward to meet her.

"Good morning," he said, with his hard smile, holding out his hand. "You were surprised to get my letter, I dare say?" he continued, as he joined her, and they walked on together.

"Yes," answered Ruth, in a low, faltering tone.

"But you will be more surprised when you hear what I have got to say," he went on, hitting out at the tall nettles which grew on the roadside with his stick, in a manner which betrayed a certain nervousness very unusual to him.

"I cannot conceive what you have got to say, nor why you should ask me to meet you here?" said Ruth, plucking up some courage.

Again Major Audley smiled his hard, cold smile, but did not speak for a moment or two, as if he were considering what words he should use.

"I shall begin then by asking you," he said, quietly, "if you remember the storm last Tuesday night?"

A burning scarlet blush instantly dyed Ruth's face.

"It—it was a bad storm," she said, in a strangely altered voice.

"Very. I had been dining that evening with the Fords at Witham, and between half-past eleven and a quarter to twelve o'clock I was walking home by the cliff walk. The

storm was then at its height, and the lightning extremely vivid ; and as I approached the steep path cut through the rock down to the bay, there was a tremendous flash, and this flash showed me very plainly the form and face of Miss Ruth Forth, who was coming up the little path from the shore. Is this so ? ”

“ No, no,” gasped Ruth, who had listened to his words in momentarily increasing terror.

“ Miss Ruth, it is useless to deny this ; I saw you as distinctly as I see you now, and I followed you home to make assurance doubly sure. And I saw you go into your garden, and steal into the back entrance, by the house—and then I turned away—I wanted to know what you had been doing. I thought you had been meeting someone, and I went down to the cliff walk to see.”

No words came from Ruth’s white parted lips. She ceased walking ; her limbs seemed powerless.

“ I went down,” continued Audley, in a low concentrated voice, fixing his full light eyes on her quivering face, “ and the lightning showed me the way. It was dangerous work, though, down those slippery steps, and you must have great courage ; but I got down all right, and I met no one ; but as I walked round the bay, close under the cliffs, I nearly stumbled and fell over something lying on the sand. Can you guess what that was, Miss Ruth ? ”

Still Ruth did not speak ; she stood as if turned to stone.

“ I stooped down and picked it up, and again the lightning befriended me ; it was the little spade I have seen in your garden ; the little spade that last Sunday afternoon Seaforth carved your name on. I have it now.”

Ruth started as if someone had struck her, and clasped both her hands on her breast.

“ You understand now why I asked you to come here,” went on Audley, with hard determination, “ and how, at least, you owe me something for having breathed this into no one’s ears but your own ? But let me finish my story ; I picked up the spade, and I instantly understood you had taken it there on such a night for some purpose. I determined to find out what that purpose was, and I did.”

Something between a gasp and a cry now fell on his ears, but the man continued his tale, though he knew he was rending the girl’s heart.

"I marked the spot with a stick where I had found the spade, and I carried the spade away with me up to the Fort, and when I got there I examined it again, and saw I had made no mistake. Then I got a lantern, and carried it and the spade back to the shore, and—shall I go on? I dug up, Miss Ruth, what you had buried there. I——"

He stopped, for Ruth had suddenly fallen forward, and he caught her in his arms.

"Listen to me," he said, half-sternly, half-tenderly, "and you need not be afraid."

But Ruth in her horror and anguish began to stagger feebly on.

"I asked you to meet me," continued Audley, unconsciously tightening his grasp on the small hand, "that I might tell you that all folly must end between you and Seaforth; I won't have it, Ruth—you know very well I like you, and you must break with him entirely."

"I cannot! I cannot! Major Audley, I cannot!"

"But you *must*!" said Audley, passionately, almost roughly, and he grasped her arm as he spoke; "my bargain is this, and if you keep to your share of it, I shall keep mine—mine is silence, yours is that you promise to be my wife."

A moan broke from her lips, and her head fell low.

"I do not wish to say any more; but let us understand each other before we part. If you wish your sister's marriage with Colonel Kenyon to go on, if in fact you do not wish to bring great shame and danger to her, and to yourself as well, marry me, and break with Seaforth. And you must do this at once," he continued, with a darkling brow; "I'll have no tender scenes, no kisses, like you indulged in, Ruth, in Sudley Woods; you must give me your kisses now."

Ruth did not speak for a moment or two, and then she said in a low, faint voice:

"Let me go home, Major Audley; I cannot bear any more to-day."

"Write me your decision, then, after you go home; but remember my bargain, and nothing shall turn me away from it."

He spoke no more to her on the subject, but walked almost in silence by her side, as with feeble and faltering footsteps Ruth returned to the village. As they neared it, however, she stopped.

"Let us part here," she said, and he did not refuse her request.

"Very well," he answered; "let me hear from you to-night, and if you act as I wish, you may completely depend on me—in self-interest then I shall hold my tongue." And he clasped her hand and left her.

CHAPTER X.

"FOR MY SAKE."

RUTH hardly knew how she got home; hardly knew how she had the strength to totter up the staircase to her own room; but when she got there she fell on her knees by the bedside, prostrate with despair.

"Oh! my God, this is too much," she cried. "Oh! let me die!"

Even as she uttered these words with her white and clammy lips, the door of the room opened, and Frances entered, and Ruth started to her feet.

"Good heavens, Ruth, whatever is the matter?" cried Frances.

"It is all over," answered Ruth in the same hoarse tones with which she had spoken to Audley; "Frances! my poor, poor sister!" and she fell upon her neck and kissed her.

"What do you mean?" And Frances grew pale.

"I went to meet Major Audley to-day," continued Ruth, forcing herself to speak; "he wrote to ask me to go—Frances, he saw me—*last Tuesday night*—he followed me; he saw me come up from the bay, and he went down and—and he found the spade I had left behind, and my name was cut on it—Kenard had cut it!"

"Well?"

"And he guessed I had hidden something," went on Ruth with gasping breath; "he marked the spot where he had found the spade—and—and he knows everything. Frances, there is nothing left for us except to die!"

"That is folly," said Frances, but her very lips had turned white. "He may not tell."

"He offered not to tell," answered Ruth, sitting down

on the bed and swinging herself to and fro in great despair, "if I would give up Kenard and marry him; but I cannot."

"You *must*!" said Frances, in a low, fierce tone, and she grasped her sister's quivering arm; "what is giving up a young man to this? Ruth, are you mad?"

"I would rather die!"

"But you will not die: you will bring disgrace and shame on us both for the sake of Seaforth, who will throw you over if this is known, for he would do this, Ruth, I can swear!"

"I—I could give up Kenard," said Ruth, in a low, broken voice, "though he is more to me than life—I should not, I know, have promised to marry him, but I loved him so well I could not bear to think that we should part—but marry the other is more than I can do."

"What folly!" cried Frances, impatiently. "Do you think I *like* to marry Colonel Kenyon, a man old enough to be my father? Do you think I love him better than you love Audley? Not a bit, I can tell you. But because I know it is well that I should marry, because we are miserably poor, and because he can give us what we want, I am ready to sacrifice myself. And yet you hesitate in a matter that is absolutely life and death to us, for I shall kill myself if this is known! Ruth, for my sake bind this man to us. Make his interests ours; and you can only do this by marrying him. You do not want to make me kill myself, do you?"

"Oh, no, no!" And Ruth shuddered.

"But I swear I will if this is ever breathed to mortal ears! I would die before I would be flouted and sneered at by everyone in Headfort; and another thing, Ruth, we might both be arrested. Do you think Seaforth would marry you then?"

"I will give him up; I will bring no shame to him!" cried Ruth in bitter agony.

"Well, dear, then why not marry Audley? Oh! promise me to do this, Ruth—you, my little sister."

Frances put her arms round Ruth's slight form as she said this, and fondly kissed her.

"For my sake," she said again, and again kissed her; and Ruth, like one who is about to die, after a while raised her head, and looked at her sister with eyes from which all hope was gone.

"For your sake I will do it," she said hoarsely; "but I pray God that I may die."

But Frances, having wrung this promise from her, insisted at once on its fulfilment. She brought paper to Ruth, and she made her write a few lines to Major Audley, to tell him she would be his wife, or rather that she accepted his conditions.

"I agree to do what you wish me to do," wrote Ruth, with shaking fingers, "if what passed between us to-day is kept for ever secret. I will write to K. S., and tell him I cannot be his wife, and ask him to go away for a while, and until he is gone I ask you to say nothing of our agreement. Do not ask also to see me for a day or two, for all this has been a great shock to me.

"RUTH FORTH."

And as soon as these broken-hearted words were written, Frances at once sent them down to the Fort. And when they arrived there, the hard, cynical man to whom they were addressed read them with a smile; and perhaps a shade of pity, too, for a moment, passed through his selfish heart.

"Poor little Ruth!" he thought, and then he smiled again. He had won, and he liked to win, and he felt what he called love for the fair-faced girl, of whom he was asking this bitter sacrifice. But he never contemplated for a moment not holding her to her word. His love was not a self-denying emotion, and he was pleased at the idea of triumphing over Seaforth. He began walking up and down his barrack-room, whistling softly as he went.

"Poor Kenyon!" he thought, presently, and he laughed; it amused him to think of the false idol to whom this kindly gentleman had given his heart.

CHAPTER XI.

JEZEBEL.

AT the very moment when Major Audley was thinking of Colonel Kenyon, with a sort of contemptuous pity, in an upper room under the same roof a young man was also thinking of him, with a heart full of jealous rage and

passionate despair. This was young Arthur Beaton, on whom the news of Frances Forth's engagement had fallen as a crushing blow, which seemed to make his life unendurable, and turn everything to gall.

In the prime of his opening manhood, and of an ardent, romantic, enthusiastic nature, he had met this beautiful woman, and she had smiled on him, and soon fanned his eager admiration into love. She was but amusing herself, though she liked the handsome boy; but he was giving all the strong feelings of his heart to one who counted them of little worth.

At first he would not believe the news which Colonel Forth was spreading with such pride and satisfaction. In a little place like Headfort, where Colonel Kenyon was so well known, his proposed marriage was naturally greatly talked of. Miss Forth was considered to have made, or rather to be about to make, a very good match, and was respected accordingly. Beaton was told of the engagement twice on the day after it occurred—the day after Frances had met him by appointment in High Street in the morning, and he could not, would not, believe it to be true.

He wandered about restlessly all the next day, and at last made up his mind to call on Frances, and so set his mind at rest. He did this, but she was either not at home or pretended she was not. Then he wrote to her, telling her that such a rumor had reached his ears, and asking her in very tender words to contradict it. To this letter Frances (unknown to Ruth) sent the following characteristic reply:—

“DEAR MR. BEATON (or shall I say dear Arthur?)

“I was sorry to miss you when you called to-day, for I wished to tell you something. Do you remember my telling you the last time I saw you that it is well to be rich, for then you can please yourself, but that when you are poor you are obliged to bow to circumstances? I am unfortunately one of the poor ones, and I have very little, or no choice given me. Yes, it is true, I am engaged to Colonel Kenyon, who, as you know, is an old friend of my father's; but I hope this will make no difference in our friendship, for, believe me, I should grieve very much if it did. I shall tell you more when I see you, and I will write you a line when I can manage this. Just at present

I have got my hands full, but do not think you are forgotten ; I can assure you that can never be.

“ Always very sincerely yours,

“ FRANCES FORTH.”

It was this letter which had nearly maddened the young man, and made all his life dark and bitter to him. He had high and generous instincts, and it stabbed him to the heart that the woman he loved so passionately should thus degrade herself. Frances, of course, meant to convey to him that she was marrying Colonel Kenyon merely for his money. This seemed to young Beaton the vilest act ; and that she—she whom he had worshipped with a blind, unreasoning worship—could thus sell herself like the coarsest of her sex, cut him to the soul.

Major Audley and Seaforth both noticed and guessed the cause of the black cloud on their young comrade's brow ; but Seaforth at least did not guess the dark purpose he nourished in his heart. He had dined at mess and drunk a great deal more than he usually did, and the wine loosed his tongue. He spoke recklessly and bitterly, and more than once Major Audley had fixed his eyes on the excited, handsome face, and knew that the passion which “ is cruel as the grave ” was eating into his soul.

After mess was over he went to his own room and sat down gloomily, to read and read again the letter which he had received by the morning's post from Frances Forth. He was a young man of good family, though the modest portion of a younger son was all his heritage. His father, Sir Robert Beaton, was dead, and his eldest brother, also Sir Robert Beaton, now reigned in his stead. Arthur was the second son, and there were besides two younger boys. Lady Beaton still lived, and the wretched young man remembered his mother more than once, as he sat there and thought of his wrecked hopes and wasted love.

Then he drew out a portrait which Frances had given him, of herself ; a portrait of a fair woman in her lovely prime, with a smile gleaming archly and coquettishly in the large bright eyes and lingering round the rosy lips. He looked at this long and darkly, and then flung it passionately on the floor, only, however, the next moment to raise it again, and crush it against his lips. There was a burning pain in his heart, a fiery physical pain, brought on by

the fierce tumult surging in his being ; and as he kissed the pictured face his eyes grew dim.

"I cannot bear it," he muttered, "it is worse than death!"

Then he began thinking how he should end it. One sharp pang was surely nothing to this. He had a new revolver that his brother Sir Robert had given him, and he got up and loaded this, and laid it on the table beside him. Strange thoughts came into his brain, and his temples throbbed and beat, and the blue veins swelled. He had a vivid imagination, and gazing with his gloomy eyes at Frances' portrait, he mentally drew pictures of her future life ; of the grey-haired man by her side, and the falsehood of her daily words !

It was horrible to him to think thus, yet he could not drag his thoughts away. They pursued, haunted, and maddened him, with hideous distinctness. And he saw her again in his mind's eye, as he had seen her the day of the garden party at Sudley Park, sitting under the spreading branches of the great tree, with her chestnut hair resting against the gnarled trunk, and smiling down on Kenyon first, and then on him.

And this was to be her home—she would sit here again, under the green flutter of the leaves, with her husband beside her ! The poor boy groaned aloud in his anguish, and dashed his hand against his burning brow. He was too young to realise that in time this bitter pain would cease ; that this love of his so strong, so deep, had yet in its very nature the seeds of change. He loved Frances Forth for what would pass away, and so surely would his love. But he thought not thus ; her fatal beauty blinded him, and his fierce despairing jealousy maddened and bewildered his brain.

Presently he began to write a few words of farewell to her ; telling her she had made his life too miserable to endure ; upbraiding her with the false wiles and smiles with which she had lured him on. Oh ! foolish words—when passion is dead and cold, does it not seem impossible to the writer to believe that his or her hand ever wrote them ! Were we so mad ? we ask ourselves—and yet we were. The chill touch of years or indifference has come between that day and this, and we cannot realise again the pain and torture that is gone. But for poor Beaton at

this moment the agony was in all its sharpness, and he told her some bitter truths. And yet he loved her even as he wrote the hard words. He kissed the letter after he had addressed it and sealed it, and then wrote a few lines to his mother, asking her to forgive him, and telling her such a great grief had come to him that he was too unhappy to live. He addressed and sealed this also, and while he was engaged in doing this, his servant, who had been a lad on their own property, and who was much attached to his young master, rapped at the room door, and came in with a letter which required an answer.

It was only an invitation from Miss Hilliard, the banker's daughter, to play tennis the next afternoon, but as Beaton tore it open and flung it impatiently down, his servant's eyes were fixed on his face curiously, and wandered from his face to the revolver lying on the table, and to the two letters lying addressed to Lady Beaton and Miss Forth.

"There is no answer," said Beaton, in a strange, altered voice, "you can go;" and the man went, but he lingered uneasily outside the room door. And presently, it must be admitted, he applied his eye to the keyhole.

And he saw poor Arthur Beaton again kiss the letter he had written to his false love; again kiss the beautiful pictured face that had ruined his young life, and then he saw him take the revolver in his hand with such a deadly, settled purpose in his face, that the man forgot all etiquette and prudence alike. He knew the Major was in his room, and he ran downstairs, and with scant ceremony burst in upon Major Audley, who was smoking, and glancing occasionally at Ruth Forth's letter, which was still lying open before him.

"Oh! excuse me, Major!" cried the man, whose face was white with terror, "but I wish you would go up beside Mr. Beaton; I don't like his looks, sir; he's got his revolver out—and——"

"Fool! why did you leave him?" answered Audley, flinging down his cigar and springing to his feet. He had noticed Beaton's dark looks, and instantly took alarm and ran upstairs as fast as he could go, and when he reached Beaton's room he gave one sharp rap and at once opened the door.

As he turned the handle a sharp report rang out, and a

moment later Audley was at Beaton's side, and had wrenched the revolver from his hand before he had time to fire another chamber.

"Beaton! are you mad?" he said, sternly; and the young man, from whose face the blood was streaming down, made no answer, but stood there facing his commanding officer, conscious that he had missed his mark; that the sudden opening of the door had startled him, and that the bullet he had intended to bury in his brain had in reality cut slantingly across his cheek, and also wounded the upper part of his ear.

Audley, a man of prompt and energetic action, now took in the whole situation at a glance. He saw the two letters lying on the table, and he saw that Beaton's wound was probably not serious, and he turned quietly to the trembling servant who had followed him upstairs.

"Go and bring Dr. Murray at once," he said. "Tell him nothing but that Mr. Beaton has had an accident, and wants immediate assistance. Hold your tongue to everyone else, and come back here; your master will want you."

Wilson, Beaton's servant, at once obeyed, and Audley was alone with Beaton.

"This folly had best be kept a secret, Beaton," he said sharply and sternly; "tell the doctor you were handling your revolver, which by some oversight had been left loaded; and I advise you to put away these," and he pointed contemptuously to the letters addressed to Lady Beaton and Miss Forth.

"Why did you stop me?" said Beaton, sullenly.

"Because you are a young madman!" answered Audley, with biting scorn. "What!" he continued, again pointing to the letter directed to Miss Forth; "for the sake of such a woman as that you would have taken your life? Do you know what she is? A painted Jezebel, at best!"

"You shall not abuse her," said Beaton, fiercely.

"No," said Audley, shrugging his broad shoulders. "But she's not worth shooting oneself for at any rate. Take my advice, Beaton, and keep this quiet; here, let me put these letters out of sight," and he pushed them into one of the writing-table drawers on which they were lying, and then began deliberately to unload the revolver, which he still held.

"Here comes the doctor," he said, as he finished. "Dr. Murray, Mr. Beaton has had an accident," he continued, as a tall, freckled, rather good-looking young Scotchman made his appearance. "He's losing a great deal of blood, but I hope it's no worse; but it will spoil your beauty a bit, Beaton."

The doctor proceeded to examine the wound, which luckily was only a flesh one, and had missed the bone of the cheek, though the cheek was cut across, and part of the ear shot away. He was bleeding profusely; and as Dr. Murray began dressing his wound, Audley calmly expatiated on the folly of being careless with fire-arms. But Beaton said very little; he was deadly pale when the blood was washed away, and his fine, sharply-cut features were set and rigid, and his dark grey eyes cast down. He felt ashamed and humiliated; he was conscious he had made a fool of himself, for to try to kill yourself and not to do so, seemed to his proud, sensitive nature an action that was sure to call down ridicule.

Audley, to do him justice, however, made the best of it. He called Wilson, the servant, out of the room into his own, and told the man he was to say nothing about the events of the evening, except that his young master had had an accident.

"I don't want to purchase your silence, you know, Wilson," he went on, unlocking his desk; "but perhaps this will help you to hold your tongue;" and he put a five pound note into the man's hand, who hesitated, turned scarlet, and in whose worthy heart a struggle instantly took place.

"There is no need for this, sir," he said, still holding the note firmly, and looking at it contemplatively; "I would cut my tongue out before I would say a word to hurt Mr. Arthur."

Audley, who understood the weakness of human nature, stood regarding the man with his hard smile; knowing pretty exactly how he wanted to keep the money, and yet did not like the idea of being paid for holding his tongue. It amused Audley to see Wilson's mental wriggles, and he therefore did not urge the five pound note upon him, which fact added to the man's eagerness to keep it.

"But of course, sir, as you've been so kind," he said, after a few moments' silence, "it's not for the like of me to

refuse anything that a gentleman like yourself chooses to give—so thank you very much,” and the note hastily disappeared into Wilson’s pocket.

“That’s right, my man,” said Audley, “keep what you can get; and now go back to your master, and mind you are not to leave him alone. Unless Mr. Seaforth, the doctor, or myself is in the room with him, you are to stay; if he objects, say I ordered you to do so.”

Wilson made his best bow and vanished, and Audley, after having locked away Ruth Forth’s letter, which he had left behind him in his hurry, returned to Beaton’s room, whom he found with bandaged face and ear, sitting quietly talking to the young Scotch doctor.

“Well, it might have been worse,” he said, after inquiring of Beaton how he felt; “but some one must stay with you, Beaton,” he added, “during the night, lest the bandage slip off; we must not allow you to bleed to death.”

“I’ll see to that,” said Dr. Murray good-temperedly, who was not without his suspicions of the true nature of the case, for Beaton’s infatuation about Miss Forth was well known in the Fort.

“All right; and his servant had better sit up with him, too,” answered Audley, and then he nodded to Beaton and went away, and having lit another cigar, began again reflectively to walk up and down his barrack-room.

“Well,” he thought, “Madame Jezebel has very nearly had another murder to answer for. What a she-devil she is, to be sure!”

And ever afterwards he thought of, and often called, beautiful Frances Forth, “*Jezebel*.”

CHAPTER XII.

A SAD LETTER.

RUTH FORTH was very ill for two days after she had written her miserable letter to Major Audley, to tell him she accepted his terms; so ill, that Frances Forth grew seriously uneasy about her, and had to answer Seaforth’s eager, anxious inquiries with a very troubled heart.

“Do have some advice, Miss Forth,” urged the young

man, when he had wrung from Frances' unwilling lips that Ruth was confined to bed, and totally unfit to see him. But the elder sister dare not send for a doctor, knowing well that any practised eye would at once perceive that it was some acute mental shock which had totally prostrated Ruth.

It was indeed pitiable to see her. The poor girl lay with white clammy face, and wide open hopeless eyes, and neither spoke nor noticed anything around her. In vain Frances tried to rouse her; in vain told her anything she thought would interest or soothe her.

"Don't talk to me, please," was all her answer.

"My heart is broken," she told herself many and many a time, moaning and turning on her pillow, which was often wet with tears.

Yet she made no complaint, nor protest in words. It was her silent sufferings which moved Frances' hardened worldly heart; and yet she always reiterated to herself that there was no help for it, that the only thing now to be done was for Ruth to marry Major Audley.

She did not tell Ruth that the drawing-room down-stairs was filled with flowers that Seaforth had sent; Colonel Kenyon also sent Ruth flowers, and was very grieved to hear of the illness of the pretty girl he hoped soon to call his young sister. He, too, urged Frances to send for the doctor, but Frances said it was nothing, and that it would soon pass away.

"You are looking ill and anxious, too, my dearest," Kenyon said to Frances, the second day of Ruth's illness. In truth, Frances had been not a little shocked and horrified to hear of the "accident" which had happened to young Beaton at the Fort. Her father had rushed in full of it, the day after it occurred, and had gone down at once to inquire particulars. Frances turned a little sick and faint, for the colonel had brought in a somewhat exaggerated account, which was current in the village. But, after his visit to the Fort, her mind was somewhat relieved. Colonel Forth had seen Audley, who told him "the stupid boy" had had a very narrow escape, through his own carelessness. Frances did not quite believe this, but she breathed a sigh of relief, and was thankful poor Beaton was not very much injured. In her heart she was more than half convinced that Beaton had

tried to kill himself for her sake, and this idea was not without a subtle charm to her.

"Poor dear boy," she thought many a time, and sent her father down every morning to inquire how he was. He did not get on very well; he had lost a great deal of blood, and was very low and desponding.

"I believe the poor fellow has something on his mind," at last Dr. Murray said to Major Audley and Seaforth.

"Perhaps he's in debt or in love," answered Audley grimly; but Seaforth did not speak. He spent many hours daily by Beaton's bedside, and felt the sincerest and kindest pity for him. Beaton never spoke of his "accident," and gradually Seaforth drew his own conclusions. He had been cut to the heart by Frances Forth's engagement, and in his first bitter anguish had tried to shoot himself.

He noticed also that Beaton was never left alone. If he went to his room he was sure to find the doctor there or his servant Wilson. Major Audley had given orders to this effect, and they were fully carried out; and, though he never spoke of it, Seaforth saw very plainly that poor Beaton was closely watched.

Frances Forth asked Seaforth about him with unmistakable interest the next time she saw him after Beaton's "accident." Seaforth had called to inquire after Ruth, and almost the first words Frances said to him were about Beaton.

"How is he?" she said.

"Very weak and low," answered Seaforth, gravely, for he felt not a little angry with Frances, whom he believed had trifled with poor Beaton's feelings for her own amusement.

"Will you tell him from me," said Frances, "how dreadfully sorry I am—more than sorry? I would write to him, only one never knows into whose hands a letter may fall; unless you would promise to give it to him yourself?"

"I think you had better not write, Miss Forth," said Seaforth, still more gravely; "it would only disturb him, and Dr. Murray says he is to be kept perfectly quiet."

Frances took the hint, which she quite understood, but she thought it rather forward of Seaforth to give it. She also felt rather afraid of this young man, and shrank some-

what from the gaze of his honest eyes. She was playing him false, too, she knew, for she had kept back two letters which he had written to Ruth, thinking their receipt would but add to the pain of their enforced parting. But, strange to say, it was the thought of these letters which first roused Ruth from her apathy. It had occurred to her grief-shadowed mind that Kenard Seaforth was almost sure to have written to her, and she asked Frances if this were so, and saw by her manner that Frances was keeping something back.

"He has written, and you have not given me his letters!" she said, indignantly. "Do you think this just and right?"

"I thought perhaps they might worry you," answered Frances, with a blush.

"How could his letters worry me?" cried poor Ruth, with a despairing ring in her voice. "Give them to me, Frances—nothing can make any difference to me now."

So Frances was obliged to produce the two letters, which she fain would have kept back. She did not understand that they could do Ruth any good, and yet they did. It was something to the poor girl to feel them lying against her breast; to know that his hand had penned the tender words. She had to part from him, but she would always love him, she told herself, and she prayed God that he also would not quite forget her.

She had a loyal, faithful heart, and she knew, or at least thought she knew, that her love could never change. But she saw lying there, looking blankly into the future, that there was no hope for them. For Frances' sake, nay for her own, and even for Kenard's, she *must* fulfil her promise to Major Audley now. And even if he set her free, she felt it would be dishonorable to marry Kenard. No, she *must* give him up, but she could not cease to love him. All the old happy dreams of a long life-time together, of the fond hand-clasp in weal and woe, were now ended. But she had his memory left to her, the memory of a brave, true, honest love, and this no new tie could take away. Major Audley might force her to marry him, for Ruth knew she was powerless in his hands; but he could not force her to give to him what she had given Kenard.

"I love him so dearly," she would whisper to herself; "only my heart knows how well."

But another letter reached her as well as Kenard's when she still lay sick and ill, and this letter Frances thought it wise to deliver at once. It was from Major Audley, who wrote to say he regretted to hear of her illness, of which he had been informed by Seaforth. But perhaps it were well to give his letter in full.

"DEAR RUTH,

"I was very sorry to hear from *Seaforth* that you are not well, and are unable to see anyone. I should have written to you before in reply to your note, in which you accept my proposition, but we have had great trouble here at the Fort. By some accident Beaton has shot himself in the face and ear; but no doubt you have heard the particulars from Colonel Forth. He is not dangerously ill, but very weak and low, and requires constant care. However, I hope soon to get him away from this place, and then I expect he will be all right. And now, regarding ourselves, I have obeyed your request, and said nothing of our engagement, so I think I have now a right to ask you to fulfil your promise, and break off entirely with *Seaforth*. When a woman is going to marry one man, the sooner she is done with the other the better; and you must of course make *Seaforth* understand that *everything* is at an end between you. I shall keep my part of our agreement faithfully, and I shall expect you to do the same. When you get this, therefore, will you write to *Seaforth*, and then let me hear from you? I shall be very pleased to see you as soon as you are well enough to receive me, and believe me to remain,

"Faithfully yours,

"R. AUDLEY."

This letter was, of course, not unexpected, and yet to Ruth it seemed a fresh blow. Its cold, hard realism filled her breast with unutterable shrinking from the fate from which there was no escape. She had told herself this often enough, but to see it, to read it, made it all so terribly plain. She had to give up *Seaforth*, whom she loved so dearly, and marry a man who had taken a cruel advantage of a miserable secret; who had wrung a promise from her to save her sister from disgrace. And what could she give such a one? No respect, no love. Cold duty at the best, and to this wretched life she had now to look forward.

But she had still to bid her love good-bye, to write the

words that she knew would give great pain to a generous, honorable heart. It was a bitter task to nerve herself to do this, yet it had to be done. Frances came into the room looking quite bright and handsome (for Colonel Kenyon had just left her), about an hour after Ruth had received Audley's letter, and her appearance jarred on the poor girl's shattered nerves and miserable heart.

"How are you now, my dear?" asked Frances, quite in a lively tone.

"As ill as I can be, I think," answered Ruth bitterly; "but you don't care what I suffer."

Her tone instantly sobered Frances' mood.

"You know that is not true," she said. "I am forced to appear to have a light heart, though in truth it's heavy as lead! That wretch Audley, I suppose, has been writing to you to remind you of your promise?"

"The wretch with whom I am to spend my life," said Ruth moodily.

"We can't help ourselves, Ruth."

"Don't I know that? I should rather be dead than do what I am going to do to-day—far, far rather be dead."

"But, dear child, if you were dead it would not save us," said Frances soothingly, laying her hand caressingly on her young sister's shoulder; "this man is in love with you——"

"Oh! don't speak of it!" interrupted Ruth with a shudder.

"All the same it is so, and men have two strong passions—love and money—for either of which they will do almost anything. But there is this difference between these two absorbing sentiments," and Frances gave a bitter laugh, "when they get what they love they soon tire of it, but they never tire of money; the love of that grows on them with years, just as the other sort of love cools. Audley is in love with you at present, and he has taken an unmanly advantage of your generous heart;" and Frances kissed her sister's sweet sad face.

She quite understood that "generous heart." She knew well enough that it was for her sake and not her own that Ruth was going to make this, to her, most bitter sacrifice. To do Frances justice she thought that in Ruth's youth and innocence she over-estimated this sacrifice. Kenard Seaforth was a nice young man, self-argued Frances, but

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there are many such, so poor Ruth need not break her heart about one. "She will get over it," Frances told herself, "and her marriage will bind to us the one person that can do us any harm."

"There is no help for it," Frances repeated, and Ruth knew it, so what more was to be said.

"I will write to him if you will leave me alone," said Ruth gently, and again Frances kissed her; and then feeling as those must do whom death is staring in the face, for whom there is left no hope in this world, Ruth sat down to tell Seaforth that it must be all ended between them, that their lives must lie apart.

She sat with her pen in her hand, not knowing in what words to tell the bitter truth. "Dear Kenard," she began; and then with a sudden wave of tenderness, a sudden gush of tears, she added: "My dear, dear Kenard,

"I have got your letters, but I have no heart to answer them. I have something to tell you which I know you will not understand, and which gives, and has given me, the deepest pain. Dear Kenard, it is hard to write it—far harder on me than you—but I cannot be your wife. There has been something come between us that I cannot help and that will not alter. There is no help for us, none on earth! I have been very ill thinking of this, and oh, so miserable, for I would gladly give my life if my death would change it, but that would do no good. It is just one of those things which must be done, though it breaks my heart to do it. Will you go away for a while, because that would perhaps make it a little easier to us? If you will, I should like to see you once before you go, and will you kiss me and forgive me, Kenard, for any pain I have given you? Believe me, it is nothing to mine, which is almost too great to bear. And do not quite forget me; think of me sometimes as one who is dead, but who loved you very dearly, for I did, dear Kenard, and I do; nothing can change this.

"RUTH."

When he received this sad letter, Kenard Seaforth's surprise, nay, utter astonishment, was very great. He read and re-read it, with a blank face, and then it suddenly struck him that his parents had privately written to Ruth, to tell her they objected to her marrying him, and that the

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poor girl in her wounded pride had determined to give him up.

He acted on this supposition, and wrote at once to Ruth to ask her to see him.

"I must see you, my dearest Ruth, because I am quite sure you have written the letter, which I have just read with such pain and surprise, under influence which should never have been brought to bear upon you. Have my father and mother written to you? If so, my dear Ruth, do be candid and open with me on the subject. They have no right, no one has any right, to do such a thing. My mother wrote to tell me she had heard some gossip about your sister in Simla, but of course I did not mention this to you, as it had no influence on me, and had nothing to do with our engagement. You tell me you love me dearly, and I love you so dearly that neither father, mother, nor sister shall part us. Do not be foolish, my dear one, and let others come between us. I can understand that your pride has been hurt, but pride is a small thing to love, and when my people know you they will like you, I am quite certain. But even if they did not, their opinion would not change mine. I shall soon get my company, and I can then exchange into some regiment out in India, and we can be married at once. I do not think that my father will withdraw my present allowance, and on that and my pay we shall be able to get along. Write me a line, dear Ruth, to tell me when I can see you, for I want this business cleared up at once. I am not going to lose my own darling little wife for anyone, and remain, with love, affectionately your own,

"KENARD SEAFORTH."

Ah, what tears were shed over those words; "heart wrung tears," as the poor girl laid her white face against them, and moaned aloud in her bitter pain.

"There is no hope, dear," she murmured, "none, none!" And again and again she repeated the grievous words.

CHAPTER XIII.

A LAST KISS.

RUTH wrote to Kenard Seaforth the same day on which she received this letter, so full of his manly honest love. Only a few words though, and these words so sad, that they filled the young man's heart with uneasy apprehension. But she would see him, she told him to "bid him good-bye." "It is all that is left to us, dear Kenard," she added ; "the memory of our love, and this last meeting."

Kenard Seaforth therefore went to this tryst in a very nervous and agitated state of mind. He, of course, could conceive no reason for Ruth's conduct, except the disapproval of his father and mother. Ruth had made no comment on this in her last letter, and thus rather confirmed Kenard in his original idea. But when he saw her—saw her so shattered and changed, he at once came to the conclusion that there was a deeper, stronger cause.

"Ruth!" he exclaimed, eagerly clasping her trembling hand; "what is it, my darling? Tell me, and let us think what can be done."

"Nothing, nothing!" sobbed the poor girl, quite breaking down; "this is the last, last time, Kenard!" And her head fell upon his breast.

He kissed the soft, ruffled hair, and drew her closer to him.

"That is folly, darling; nothing can part us if we cling to each other."

But Ruth only wailed and wept, and in vain Seaforth, with the kindest and tenderest words, tried to comfort her.

"Don't, don't, Kenard, it's no use," she said pathetically. "Do you think if there were any hope I should give it up?"

"But, dear, I don't understand——"

"And I cannot tell you," she interrupted, raising her tear-stained face, and looking straight at him with her large, wistful eyes; "this is what makes it so terrible, so

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bitter—thinking what you must think of me—feeling that you will despise me ; and yet——”

“I shall never despise you, Ruth. My darling, darling girl, only trust me ; why can you not trust me ? Surely you believe I never should betray anything you could tell me ? ”

A temptation crossed her heart at this moment to tell him all. She hesitated ; again she looked in his kind, honest face, and clear eyes. Her lips parted, and then a burning blush suddenly dyed her pale face. She shivered ; she drew herself back from his arms, and all the terrible consequences that might follow, if this miserable story were told, flashed across her brain. Seaforth naturally would resent Audley's conduct with the strongest indignation, and then Audley's bitter tongue might be untied. It was impossible ; there was no help for it ; she must bear all the pain ; all the loss of this, to her, the dearest man on earth !

“I cannot tell you,” she faltered in a broken voice, after a brief silence, and her eyes fell ; “I can only tell you what I wrote, Kenard—there is no help for it—and—and we must say good-bye.”

“If you would only give me some clue ? ”

She mournfully shook her head ; and then with a sudden tender impulse put both her hands in his.

“My dear, let me be to you as if you had once loved someone who is dead—think of me as dead—yet love me a little still.”

“But I cannot think of you as dead, Ruth—dead ! with your sweet face near mine.”

He kissed her passionately as he spoke, and as their lips met, she flung her arms round his neck and laid her soft, wet cheek against his.

“Good-bye, Kenard,” she whispered. “Good-bye, my love, my only love ! ”

“How can you ask me to say good-bye ? ” he answered impetuously, clasping her closer.

“We *must* say it,” and she gently drew herself back from his arms as she spoke. “Go away now, Kenard, and go from Headfort for a time—you will spare me some pain by this—and—and afterward don't quite misjudge me. Believe, at least, that I cannot help myself.”

“Promise not to change to me then, Ruth,”

"I will promise," she said, with even a certain solemnity of manner, and again she looked up in his face. "At least no one can force me to give my heart, or make me forget you, Kenard."

At this moment the voice of Frances Forth was heard outside the drawing-room door, for this sad interview had, by Ruth's wish, taken place in her father's house, and necessarily with the knowledge of Frances, who had promised that it should not be disturbed. But from the minute of Seaforth's arrival, Frances had been exceedingly uneasy. She knew that her young sister was deeply attached to him, and she not unnaturally dreaded his influence on her heart.

"What if the silly girl were to commit herself!" she thought, as she walked impatiently up and down the dining-room waiting to hear him go. "But she will not be so mad—no, for her own sake she will not tell."

Still, she was very anxious, and as time went on—time so swift to them, so slow to Frances—the elder sister began to feel she could no longer endure her suspense. She went out into the passage, therefore, and loudly and ostentatiously called out the name of the one maid of the establishment. Then she noisily turned the handle of the drawing-room door, and Kenard's hands and Ruth's fell apart as she did so.

"Good-bye," whispered Ruth; and as Frances opened the door and walked in, Ruth again looked up in Kenard's face, and he never forgot the silent misery depicted at that moment in her grey and shadowy eyes.

"Good morning, Mr. Seaforth," said Frances, holding out her hand, as she spoke; Ruth quitted the room, and Seaforth and Frances were alone. And it crossed his mind as he stood there, looking at her beautiful, blooming face, to ask her what ailed Ruth; what possible cause there could be for her strange conduct. But Seaforth had an instinctive distrust of Frances. She had always been most agreeable to him, and yet he had never really liked her. He hesitated, therefore, to speak of what Ruth might wish concealed; and Frances quickly—for she did not want to talk of Ruth—began to ask after Beaton, and show the greatest interest concerning him.

"Did you give him my message?" she asked.

"No, Miss Forth, I did not," he answered briefly.

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"I saw no good in doing so."

"Very polite of you!" said Frances, with a shrug and a smile.

Seaforth did not speak; and after waiting for a moment, expecting him to do so, Frances added:

"Is he going from here soon?"

"Yes, I believe so; his mother is expected to-day, and she will probably take him away."

"To-day?" said Frances reflectively.

She really liked the unfortunate young man who had injured himself for her sake, and she wished to let him know how sorry she was for his sufferings. But she was afraid to commit herself by writing, more especially if there were any chance of her letter falling into Lady Beaton's hands.

"It was very mean of you," she said, with her charming smile, "not to give him my message; he and I were great friends, and I really am so sorry, and I want him to know."

Seaforth cast down his eyes.

"What are you keeping back from me, Mr. Seaforth?" now asked Frances. "Is there any mystery about Mr. Beaton's accident? Was it an *accident*?"

"I was told so, Miss Forth."

"If I thought——" and then Frances hesitated, keeping her changeful eyes on the young man's face.

"I have no reason to believe anything else," said Seaforth, quickly; "if you like, I can tell him you are very sorry about it."

"Do tell him so, please; tell him I should like to see him—only."

"It is impossible you could see him just now; he is too weak and ill for any excitement; but I will give him your message; and now, good morning, Miss Forth."

He shook hands with her and went away; and, when he was gone, Frances, after considering a few moments, proceeded slowly upstairs to Ruth's room, where the girl had flung herself on the floor in a paroxysm of abandonment and grief.

"Oh! Ruth, do not be so silly——" began Frances.

But she paused when Ruth rose up and stood before her, with her pale face full of passion and despair.

"Silly!" she repeated indignantly, "when you have

forced me to give up all I care for on earth ! When I shall become in his eyes one of the vilest of women, for I know what he will think of me—what he *must* think ! ”

“ But just consider,” said Frances, in a subdued tone.

“ Have I not considered ? ” answered Ruth, with bitter emphasis, beginning to walk up and down the room with hasty and irregular footsteps. “ I have thought and thought of this until I am nearly mad ! You have ruined my life, Frances, and I wish you would leave me alone. I should rather be alone.”

And Frances turned and crept away, ashamed before this deep, despairing anguish in one whom she had believed incapable of such passionate emotion.

CHAPTER XIV.

A FIRST KISS.

KENARD SEAFORTH returned to the Fort, after his interview with Ruth, with a moody brow and a troubled heart. He recalled her words and looks of great tenderness and love, and yet she had told him they were given for “ the last, last time.” And her unmistakable grief and changed appearance filled him with profound uneasiness. She, at least, plainly intended that it should be all over between them ; but Kenard Seaforth could not bring his mind to realise this.

“ I am not going to give her up,” he decided ; “ my darling loves me, I am sure of that ; and I won’t allow anything or anyone to part us.”

He thought this as he ascended the stone staircase of the Fort, and went up to his own room, pausing, however, at the door of young Beaton’s quarters, as he remembered the message he had promised to deliver from Frances Forth.

He rapped, and a lady’s voice called to him to enter, and when he went in he found a tall, handsome, dark woman sitting by Beaton’s bed. This was his mother, Lady Beaton, who smiled and bowed, and held out a white slim hand, when her son introduced Seaforth to her.

“ My boy has been telling me how good you have been to him, Mr. Seaforth,” she said, graciously.

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"I hope he'll soon be quite well, now," answered Seaforth, kindly, looking from the mother's straight marked features to the pallid face lying on the pillows. There was a strong likeness between the two, and both were of singular regularity and beauty. But there was a sort of hopeless apathy and weariness in Arthur Beaton's expression, while that of Lady Beaton's was calm, lofty and content. She knew nothing of Arthur's mad attempt upon his own life, but believed his injuries had been accidental, and was proud and fond of her handsome son.

"Will you stay and chat with him awhile, Mr. Seaforth?" she asked presently. "I only arrived an hour ago, and I want to go and look after my maid, and see what sort of rooms she has contrived to get for us."

"I shall be delighted," said Seaforth; and Lady Beaton, having kissed Arthur and promised to be back shortly, left the room, and Seaforth was thus free to deliver his message.

"I have just seen a friend of yours, Beaton," he began, "who was making a great many anxious inquiries after you."

In an instant the white face flushed, and the thin hand lying outside the coverlet twitched.

"Miss Forth asked me to tell you," went on Seaforth, "how very sorry she was to hear of your accident. She said she should like to see you, but I told her that was impossible."

"And did she say anything else?" asked Beaton, with sudden excitement and passion, raising himself up in bed. "Did she know what she has done for me—though I am a fool to talk of it?"

"She is not worth it, Beaton," answered Seaforth, gravely.

"Don't you think I know that?" said Beaton, with extraordinary bitterness; "don't you think I know it was only to gratify her vanity that she tried to make me care for her, when all the time she meant to marry Colonel Kenyon? No one knows better!" And he gave a harsh, short laugh.

"Then I should try to forget her; try not to think of her."

"It's easy to give advice; people tell the drunkard not to drink, the madman not to leap from the dizzy height; but does it stop them? No, they go to destruction all the same, and they know, too, that they are going."

"But, Beaton, you don't mean to tell me that if you had no respect or honor for a woman, that a mere blind passion for her beauty would make you—well, unhappy about her?"

Beaton turned restlessly in bed before he answered, and then he looked at Seaforth with a face full of gloom.

"I know I must seem a fool to you," he said, "but—I've understood, Seaforth, though you have not talked of it—that you knew what this woman drove me to? Yet even now, think me mad as you like, I can think of no one else, and everything is utterly weary and dreary to me."

"You'll get over all that."

"Will I? I wish I could begin, then. But what's the good of talking of one's folly?—tell me everything the future Mrs. Kenyon said, and how did she look?"

"She's always handsome, you know."

"Handsome! She's beautiful, she's a perfect creature, and it's no use saying anything else. And, to think—good heavens! it makes me mad to think of it—that she will be that old man's wife, and that perhaps I shall see her—but what did she say?"

"She seemed very sorry; she has talked to me about you before, but I must confess I don't think very highly of her."

"You cannot tell their circumstances," said Beaton, restlessly; "they say Colonel Forth is poor, and Frances told me so; told me beggars could not be choosers, or something to that effect. Of course she is just marrying Kenyon for his money; there is no doubt of that—but it seems so horrible, such degradation."

"Colonel Kenyon is a very nice man."

"He may be nice enough, I don't say he's not, but he's old enough to be her father, and I cannot bear to think of it! Did she say anything about writing?"

"She said something about writing before."

"Seaforth, will you do something for me? Can I trust you?"

"You certainly can trust me."

"I should like to write a few lines to her then; a few lines that no one else could know anything about. Will you give them to her if I do?"

"Yes, certainly, if you wish it."

"Reach me that desk, then, like a good fellow; I don't

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want my mother to know—nor Audley. I am going home with my mother in a day or two, and I should like—well, to say good-bye.”

Seaforth brought the desk, and then turned away and went to the window, and stood there looking down at the misty sea. It was a grey, dull day, and his heart was sad and troubled. He was very fond of Ruth Forth, and her unaccountable conduct seemed more and more unreasonable the longer he thought of it. And while Beaton, with his shaking hand, was pouring out his eager passionate words of farewell to the beautiful woman who had bewitched his soul, Seaforth made up his mind that he would ask for leave and go home for a short time to see his father and mother, and try to persuade them to give their consent to his marriage; for his mind had again returned to the idea that somehow through their influence Ruth had acted as she had done.

Presently, with a weary, heavy sigh, Beaton told him his letter was ready.

“Very well, shall I seal it and enclose it to Miss Forth?” said Seaforth, returning to the bedside; and, with reluctant hand—as though he did not care to part with it—Beaton gave him the letter, which Seaforth addressed to Miss Forth, and sealed before him.

He was still talking of her, this unhappy boy, abusing Frances at one moment and praising her the next, for he ever “fed on love’s moody food,” though he knew it was poisoning him, when Major Audley rapped at the room door and came in, and after exchanging a few words, Seaforth asked him if he could have leave for a day or two.

Audley looked at him sharply as he did this, and smiled.

“Yes, my dear fellow,” he said; “when do you want to go?”

“To-morrow, if I can get away,” answered Seaforth. “I want to see my father about some business matters,” and he cast down his eyes.

“All right,” said Audley, and the conversation ended, Seaforth shortly afterwards leaving the room, and carrying Beaton’s foolish words for Frances Forth away with him. But Audley did not go until Lady Beaton returned. His cool, acute gaze had read some fresh signs of restless misery in Beaton’s face, and he was afraid to leave him. He

guessed the truth perhaps, and thought it very likely that Frances Forth had sent some note or message by Seaforth, and he thought also some very hard things of her. He therefore waited for Lady Beaton, and then went to his own room and wrote to Ruth Forth. He sat with pen in hand for a few moments, considering what to write before he commenced, and then wrote as follows:—

“DEAR RUTH,—Seaforth has just asked for leave, therefore I conclude you have fulfilled your promise and broken with him. He is going to-morrow, and I propose to call on you to-morrow afternoon about four o’clock, and shall afterwards speak to your father, and tell him of our engagement. I wish also our marriage to take place soon, to which I expect you to offer no objections. But we can discuss this point when I see you to-morrow, and

“I remain,

“Very sincerely yours,

“R. AUDLEY.”

The next morning’s post carried this hard letter to the broken-hearted girl to whom it was addressed. Ruth had been quite prostrate during the rest of the day after her interview with Seaforth; her overwhelming grief seeming to her greater than she could bear. She had not attempted to go down to dinner, and Frances grew absolutely afraid that after all she was going to break her promise, and refuse to carry out her engagement to Audley. And the terrible consequences of this were quite clear to Frances, and yet she dare not speak on the subject to her young sister, who looked like one who had heard her death warrant. Nay, it was more bitter than death to her, this rending of her heart; this breach of faith to one so dear; this giving herself for a price so vile. She had to buy Audley’s silence by the sacrifice of all that was pure and beautiful to her; her love, her tender hopes, her lover’s trust—all must go. Ruth lay there on her bed counting the cost with dry, tearless eyes, after Frances had left her, and it seemed to her more than she could endure. She resolved at length—vain hope!—to try to turn Audley from his purpose. She would see him, she told herself, and kneel down and pray him for God’s sake to have some pity on her. She would give up Kenard—oh, yes; she had given him up—she would promise never to see him

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again, never to speak to him any more, if only Major Audley would not force her to marry him.

Some sort of hope stole into her breast after she had made this resolution. But she little knew the nature with which she had to deal, and that the pretty snared songster of the fields has as much chance of release from its hard-eyed captor, as it beats itself against the cruel bars of its cage, as she had from the man who held her in his power. Audley had strong passions and a determined will, and Ruth's sweet face had won his fancy, and he thought her girlish love for Seaforth would soon die. His letter gave a fresh blow to her poor trembling heart, but she still kept to her purpose, and determined to see him. She said nothing of this to Frances, and Frances wondered what had given the look of strength to her usually wistful grey eyes, and could not understand, when Audley called at the appointed hour, how it was that Ruth received the announcement very quietly, and at once rose and went into the drawing-room.

"She must have expected him," thought Frances anxiously, and during the interview which followed, the elder sister waited upstairs with a fast-beating, troubled heart.

And now let us see how it was faring with the pale girl who meant to beg for something that was dearer to her than life. Ruth walked into the drawing-room in that quick mechanical way with which we sometimes go to meet painful scenes, and speak painful words. Audley was standing by the window as she went in, and he at once advanced to meet her with outstretched hand. Did he feel how chill was her little palm, and note her pale cheeks and averted eyes? If so, he made no sign and asked no questions.

"Well, I have been very good, have I not?" he said smiling, "and done exactly what you told me; so you must be good in return."

He did not release her cold, fluttering hand, but held it in his strong, warm grasp, and a feeling of powerlessness began to creep over Ruth's sinking heart.

"Seaforth left this morning," went on Audley, with his eyes fixed on her changing face, "and before he returns I want him to hear that we are engaged, and I shall write and tell him so; for, of course, you have entirely broken off with him, Ruth?"

"Yes," said Ruth's faltering tongue.

"That is all settled then. Come, my pretty Ruth, you must give me a lover's privilege."

He would have kissed her, but with a sudden and passionate gesture, Ruth pushed him away.

"Don't, don't, Major Audley!" she said in a tone of inexpressible aversion; "I have something to say to you—something that you must hear."

"And what is that?" asked Audley, coldly.

"It is this," answered Ruth, her voice trembling with pathos and feeling. "I have given up Kenard Seaforth; I shall never speak a word to him again if you wish me not to do so; but—but don't ask anything else of me—don't ask me to do what can bring neither you nor me any happiness, what must bring sure misery to us both?"

Audley did not speak for a moment; he stood looking at her pleading face, and his brow grew dark, and his expression hard.

"Am I to understand then," he said at length, slowly, "that you wish me to release you from your engagement?"

"Yes, that is what I mean," said Ruth, trembling. "I can give you nothing, Major Audley—no love, nothing that could make our lives happy; and why, therefore, should you wish to marry me, when you could marry many women who would really care for you?"

"But suppose I have a fancy to marry you, and not any other woman?"

"But such a fancy will soon pass away, surely," pleaded Ruth. "Just think for a moment what it must be to marry a woman whose heart is quite cold to you—whose heart is not her own to give!"

"You mean you have still not got over your little tenderness for Seaforth, I suppose?" scoffed Audley with suppressed bitterness. "My dear child, we all have some calf-love or other, but you will quite forget Seaforth after you are married to me."

Ruth shook her head.

"No, no," she said, "you do not understand; you think it was only a stupid flirtation between us perhaps, but it was not; we care for each other very much, and surely when you know this——"

"You seem to forget our bargain, I think."

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"I mean that I promised to keep that little dangerous secret of your sister's for certain considerations ; one was that you should give up Seaforth, which you have done ; the other that you should marry me."

"Yes, yes, I know ; but surely you will not hold me to this. Oh ! Major Audley, have some pity—this secret was no fault of mine, at least—don't make me suffer for another's sin !"

The poor girl fell on her knees as she spoke, and clasped her hands in vain entreaty, for the hard eyes watching her never softened.

"You look very pretty," he said, as he laid his hand on her arm, and raised her up, "but don't try these little theatrical poses on me too often, Ruth, for they have no effect on me ; I know your sex too well," he added, with a short, harsh laugh. "Now listen," he went on a moment later, tightening his grasp on her trembling arm, "and let me tell you once for all that I mean to hold you to your bargain, or I won't keep mine. Unless you marry me, Colonel Kenyon will never marry your sister, and I can promise you that Seaforth's people will never allow him to marry you."

Ruth drew her arm away from his touch, and made a step backwards, and stood looking at him in dumb reproach.

"You must make your choice, then," continued Audley, "and that choice must be final."

"You leave me no choice," said Ruth, still looking at him ; "you have no pity."

Again Audley laughed that short, harsh laugh.

"Come," he said, "it's not such a bad fate as all that ; many a man would have made it harder."

"It could be no harder," retorted Ruth, with strong and passionate emotion ; "you may force me to marry you, Major Audley, but you cannot force me to give you any love. I warn you in time, our marriage will end miserably."

"All right, I'll run the risk ; then you will marry me, and marry me soon ?"

"Yes."

"And I wish to be married before your sister's marriage with Colonel Kenyon comes off. When is that to be ?"

"They talk of it in about a month."

"Then we have no time to lose ; suppose we fix ours this day fortnight ? "

For a moment she did not answer ; she clasped her hands, a vivid blush dyed her face, but when she did speak her voice was full of scorn.

"It's all the same to me," she said ; "if it has to be, sooner or later can make no difference."

"Come, my little lady, that's rather cool, you know, and you must drop all that kind of thing," said Audley, who was really terribly annoyed by her manner. "I think I must add another clause to my bargain, which is that you keep a civil tongue in your head. After all, I think you might remember that a man must be fairly hard hit by your pretty face who is anxious to enter into *your* family ; considering all things."

Ruth made no answer, and for a moment or two Audley also was silent. He walked to the window of the room and stood looking out, and a doubt crossed his mind about the wisdom of his own conduct. Then he turned round and looked at her again—so pale, so fair—and what he called love was stronger than his reason.

"It will all come right by-and-bye," he said, crossing the room and taking her reluctant hand, "unless you are a very headstrong little woman, which I do not think you are. Is your father in the house, and if he is, can I speak to him and tell him we have settled it all ? "

"I will see if he is in," answered Ruth, and as she turned to leave the room, Audley suddenly caught her in his arms and kissed her.

"There ! I must have one," he said, and as the poor girl escaped from the room she drew out her handkerchief and violently rubbed the cheek and lips which his had touched.

She met her father in the hall, for Colonel Forth was just coming in from a walk, and had no idea Major Audley was in the drawing-room.

"Father, Major Audley is in the drawing-room, and wishes to speak to you," said Ruth hastily, as she passed him.

"Audley ! Is he ? What does the fellow want ! " answered the Colonel ; but to this Ruth made no reply, and Colonel Forth proceeded to the drawing-room, where he found Major Audley.

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"Has Ruth told you what I have got to say?" asked Audley, as the two men shook hands.

"*Ruth*? No," and the Colonel's red face grew redder. "Confounded impertinence," he was thinking, "to call the girl by her name." But his mental resentment was speedily cut short.

"She and I agreed to get married," continued Major Audley, "and I trust, Colonel Forth, you will not withhold your consent?"

"Get married!" repeated Colonel Forth, in intense astonishment. "Why, I never thought of such a thing; I did not know you had any idea of such a thing, Audley."

"I've admired Ruth for a long while, and now I am happy enough to have gained her consent; and there is nothing to prevent our being married immediately—I mean no monetary considerations—as I have some fortune of my own."

He then proceeded to tell the astonished Colonel that Ruth had agreed to marry him in a fortnight; that he had an income of over a thousand a year beside his pay, and that he was willing to settle five hundred a year on Ruth, in the event of his death occurring before her own, under the condition that she did not marry again.

The Colonel listened, absolutely aghast; it took his breath away to think of his own good luck! To get both his daughters provided for in this easy, pleasant fashion was more than he had ever hoped for.

"You have quite surprised me," he said, his sour smile growing almost sweet. "Well, Audley," and he held out his lean hand, "if you and Ruth have made up your minds, I suppose I must just make up my mind to lose her."

"We shall not be very far off you for a while, at least," answered Audley, returning the parental hand-clasp.

"No, that's something; and Frances will be near me too when she marries my old friend Kenyon; but still, I'll miss Ruth; she's been my little housekeeper, you see;" and he began at this moment actually to think that he should miss her; for in the complex medley we call the human heart, there is ever a strong inclination to cling to that which we are about to lose.

CHAPTER XV.

KENARD GOES HOME.

KENARD SEAFORTH went straight from Headfort to the country house which his father, General Seaforth, had taken in the Southern District, where he commanded. It was a day's journey from the northern coast on which Headfort frowns down upon the misty sea. He had telegraphed to his mother to expect him, and a carriage was waiting for him at the station nearest to his father's place. He arrived home about half-past nine o'clock in the evening, and as he drove round the circular approach to the house, he saw his mother standing watching for him at the open hall door, and a few moments later was in her arms.

"My dear boy, I am so pleased to see you!" said this gentle-faced little woman, kissing her son fondly with her pretty faded lips. Indeed, everything about Mrs. Seaforth was pretty and faded. She had small delicate features, pale faded hair, dainty little hands, and her dress also was invariably composed of either black or soft neutral tints. Her expression, however, was very beautiful. It was so serene that unconsciously it reminded you of higher things. The peace which the world cannot give had left its stamp on the sweet placid face, and looked out of the pale soft eyes. Kenard was her only surviving child, and Mrs. Seaforth loved him with an absorbing love.

She put her arm through his as the servants were bringing the luggage into the hall, and together they went into the drawing-room, where the General was sitting reading the newspapers. He rose and shook his son's hand very cordially, and enquired after his journey. He was keen and soldierly-looking, of some sixty years, and had been a man of war from his youth upwards, and had seen much active service in various quarters of the globe. He, too, was fond of his boy, and sometimes used to boast that

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Kenard had never cost him a blush or a sigh. Not that the General was a man given either to blushing or sighing. He was a tough old soldier, a bit of a martinet if the truth must be told, and an exacting husband to the gentle wife who obeyed him, and looked up to him in everything.

"I tell you what, Lucy," he had said to her, when they had received Kenard's telegram in the morning, "he's coming to try to talk us over about that girl; but mind, I'll stand no nonsense."

Mrs. Seaforth felt quite timid, therefore, at the idea of Kenard speaking to her on a subject on which she would be forced to give him pain. She talked quickly and nervously all the time he was eating his dinner, for it was characteristic of the General that he had not waited to partake of that meal with his son. Every day the dinner was served precisely at eight o'clock in the General's establishment: and he did not break through this rule because Kenard was expected at nine or half-past. Kenard's comforts, however, had not been neglected by the tender mother, and she sat and watched him with loving eyes.

They talked of all sorts of things except the subject nearest their hearts, and Colonel Forth's name or that of his daughter was never mentioned during Kenard's first evening at home. But the next morning, when the General had sallied forth on his military duties, Kenard, having declined to accompany him began walking restlessly up and down the breakfast-room, where he and his mother were; and the timid little woman felt her heart sink within her, as she was sure Kenard was about to talk to her of his love.

And presently he began.

"I want to say something to you, mother," he said abruptly.

"Well, my dear," and in her agitation the dainty fingers dropped two loops from the knitting needles of the red silk sock she was knitting for Kenard.

"It's about Miss Forth," continued Kenard, nervously; "Ruth Forth, you know, to whom I was engaged."

"I had hoped that was all ended, Kenard; your father was very angry about it."

"But why, mother?" asked Kenard, energetically. "She's as good and pure a girl as ever breathed, and I cannot understand what my father's objection to her can be."

"You see, my dear, there were sad things, said out in India about her sister," and poor Mrs. Seaforth lost some more loops.

"But what has her sister to do with her? Besides, this very sister is going to marry Colonel Kenyon, of Sudley Park, who used to command the——Lancers you, know."

"Well, I hope it will turn out well, Kenard; it is certainly a very fortunate thing for Miss Forth, under the circumstances."

"But what were the circumstances, mother?" said Kenard, sharply, and he stopped before his mother's chair, and a delicate blush rose to her faded cheeks as he did so.

"My dear, I do not like to repeat scandal, particularly when Miss Forth is going to marry an honorable man like Colonel Kenyon."

"But I think it is only right I should know, when you condemn her young sister for her sake, for I am sure you have heard nothing against Ruth?"

"No, Kenard, but your father and I thought——"

"Mother, did either you or my father write to Ruth, and tell her you disapproved of my marrying her?" now asked Kenard, abruptly.

"Certainly not, my dear," answered the gentle little woman, looking up in great surprise; "were we likely to do anything unknown to you—our own dear boy?"

Kenard bent down and kissed his mother's forehead, who tenderly raised her lips to his.

"Thank you for that, mother," he said; "but the strangest thing has happened. Ruth wrote to me to tell me it must be all over between us, and she sent for me yesterday to bid me good-bye; and though she told me she cared for me, that she never would care for anyone else, still she said we must part, and I could not understand it."

"Then she has given you up?"

"Yes—but, mother, I don't mind telling you—it isn't because she has changed to me, you know; a man can tell when a girl really likes him, and Ruth really likes me, and I most truly love her. Mother, d'ye know I never would care to marry any other woman if I don't get Ruth? I feel like that."

"But you won't always feel thus, Kenard."

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"Oh! won't I though! She's so pretty, and so sweet, and so tender; and I seem to understand her heart like she understands mine. And yesterday I saw her heart was half-broken—and, and I am miserable about her!"

"She must have some strong reason?"

"Of course she must, and I want to find out what it is. I don't half like that handsome sister of hers, I can tell you; can she have had anything to do with it, do you think?"

"I should think Miss Forth would have only been too happy to secure such a husband as you for her sister," said Mrs. Seaforth, with some pride.

"Well, then, what can it be? What was this scandal, mother, about Frances Forth out in India? You had better tell me; I need not say the story is quite safe with me?"

"My dear, it's a very painful story, and was much talked of some eight or nine months ago at Simla. Miss Forth was very injudicious, at all events, and went constantly about with Lord Walter Greville, of the — Dragoons. Lord Walter, who is a very handsome man, was known to be married, though separated from his wife. At least she was not out with him in India, but Miss Forth must have known he was married. Well, the affair went on to such lengths that, at last, a great scandal arose, and Lord Walter tried to get his wife to divorce him, it was said, but Lady Walter refused. It ended in Colonel Forth leaving India with his two daughters, and I daresay it will be all forgotten now, especially when Miss Forth is going to marry so well."

"It is probably half of it nonsense, just Indian gossip; and I quite fail to see still why Ruth should be disappointed of as my wife, because her sister had a flirtation with a married man in India, especially when such things are so common. Mother dear, I am sure you would love her; do try to get my father to give his consent to our marriage; I fancy, if I could go and tell Ruth that you wished it, that it would all come right—and, mother dear, I do care for her so."

He took his mother's little hand as he spoke, and looked in her face with his earnest truth-telling eyes, and Mrs. Seaforth felt she could not refuse his request, though she was in much awe of her husband.

"Well, my dear boy, I will try," she said; "but you know your father is very firm."

"Still, I think you could persuade him; this is her photograph, mother—isn't it a sweet face?"

Mrs. Seaforth put on her silver-rimmed spectacles to look at the "sweet face," and her heart echoed her son's words. It was a womanly, loving, modest face, and yet there was a depth of passion and tenderness in the shadowy eyes; eyes which almost looked fated to weep for some great tragic grief or wrong.

"She is very pretty," said Mrs. Seaforth, gently.

"It isn't even that she's so pretty," answered Kenard, gazing at the fair portrayal of his young love, with a lover's enthusiasm, "but she's so nice; a kind of girl who has so much sympathy and feels so for anyone who is in trouble and that kind of thing. And she loves horses and dogs, mother, and don't they like her; my little Jocky is always going up to her and licking her hand, and doesn't he whine when he knows I am going to Colonel Forth's and don't take him."

Mrs. Seaforth smiled and looked at her son, whose good-looking brown face had flushed, and whose eyes were full of tenderness and feeling, in spite of his simple, boyish words. And the mother understood that her boy's heart was really and truly given to this fair girl, and she made up her mind to try to overcome her husband's objections to the marriage.

"We must see what we can do with your father," she said; "and perhaps as Miss Forth is going to marry Colonel Kenyon——"

Truly we who live in this world are of it! Here was a gentle. God-fearing woman tainted too, though she had thought to set her affections and hopes far above its shallow creeds and thin distinctions. Frances Forth was becoming white-washed even in her eyes, now when she was going to marry a rich man and take a good place among her fellows. Yet it was the same Frances Forth who had been stoned by those who could scarce have stood the scathing comment of the wise sad Judge of the human heart, who bade him who was without sin to fling the first missile at the Jewish woman of old. We short-sighted mortals condemn so freely, that the dark spirits which maybe pass and re-pass, unseen around us, must

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often laugh with malignant laughter as they listen to our self-righteous words. Mrs. Seaforth's simple heart thought not of these grim problems and unknown mysteries of life. She but spoke in common speech, spoke as most men and women do. It was an advantage to Ruth Forth in her mind that her elder sister was about to marry well, and Frances Forth's shortcomings were now almost forgotten, though but a short while ago both the General and his wife had not scrupled on account of them to try to part a young couple's plighted love.

And the news of Colonel Kenyon's engagement was not without effect on the General also. Mrs. Seaforth, with some womanly tact, did not broach the subject of Kenard's wishes until she had told her husband that Colonel Forth's eldest daughter was going to marry Colonel Kenyon almost immediately.

"You remember him, John, don't you," she said. "He was a good-looking, gentlemanly man?"

"Of course I remember him," replied the General; "is he absolutely going to make such a fool of himself as to marry Miss Forth, after the way she's been talked of?"

"Kenard tells me they are to be married very soon, and he says that Colonel Kenyon has such a beautiful place not far from Headfort, and that he is a very wealthy man."

"I heard that he had inherited a fortune," quoth the General, "at the time he retired from the service; it's a lucky thing for Forth, I should say, who is a devilish poor cross-grained fellow."

"It's a very lucky thing, and, of course, will make a great difference in their position altogether."

"Oh, yes, of course, money always does. Miss Forth is some years older, isn't she, than the girl Kenard was after? By-the-bye, has he said anything more of that folly?"

"He showed me her portrait, and it's the sweetest face, John, that you ever saw. But such a strange thing has happened. She has given him up, and he even fancied we might have written to her to say that we disapproved of the connection."

"Then I hope you told him we did nothing of the sort?"

"Of course, I told him so, but she may have heard somehow or other that we did not like it."

"Nor do I like it; of course, it makes a difference if

Kenyon is going to marry the eldest girl, as she was the objectionable one."

"Yes, that was what I thought, though I did not say much to Kenard until I heard your opinion. Kenard's young lady is five or six years younger than the future Mrs. Kenyon, and I remember Mrs. Bartlett saying she was a very sweet girl, at the time when Frances Forth was so much talked about, though I dare say it was more scandal than anything else."

The General smiled grimly.

"Does all this mean," he said, "that Kenard has talked you over?"

"Of course not, John, unless you wish it. But I must let you see her photograph, and I believe the darling boy is very fond of her; he told me unless he married her he would never marry anyone else."

"Oh, I dare say!"

"But he is *really* fond of her, John—I could see that in his face when he talked of her—and he is sadly cut up about her giving him up, because he says they are very, very fond of each other. And there are such things you know, John, as people being *very* fond of each other," and Mrs. Seaforth rose, crossed the room, and affectionately laid her little hand on the General's shoulder, and kissed his brow.

"There, there, you little woman, that's enough," he said, as he returned the salute. "So I expect this is a plan between you and Master Kenard, to talk me over, eh? Well let them wait until the elderly swain is really married, and then we can talk about it. But it's a strange business, her being so ready to give him up? Ten to one she has another string to her bow."

"Oh, I don't think so; no, Kenard believes that it hurt her pride to know that we were not ready to welcome her, and I like a girl with that kind of feeling, don't you, John?"

"Don't bother me about her any more just now, my dear; wait until Kenyon has made a fool of himself in earnest, then we can see;" and the General began reading his newspaper, and the meek wife knew she was expected to hold her tongue.

All the same, she felt that her husband was veering round, and presently she stole quietly out of the room and

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went to seek her darling boy, who was smoking in the garden outside.

Smoking, and thinking brave, tender thoughts. Ruth's clinging arms were around his neck in his memory still, and her sweet, sad words were yet ringing in his ears—"Good-bye, my love, my only love." Up and down Kenard kept pacing, wondering what it all could mean. He was quite sure of one thing, at least, which was that Ruth loved him, and that he loved Ruth.

"It will all come right; it must come right," he told himself, looking upwards at the stars; and as he did this he heard his mother's step approaching, and a minute or two later they were pacing side by side, her hand through the arm of her tall son.

"I have spoken to your father, my dear, and I am sure he will give his consent in time; wait until Colonel Kenyon is married, Kenard, and then I am certain I shall be able to welcome my pretty new daughter."

"And you will love her so much, mother; she is not a bit like Frances, you know, but—" And so on, and so on.

And the mother listened, well pleased, as Kenard, "out of the fulness" of his heart, prattled on about his fair young love. He loved her deeply, truly, and the thought of her colored all his dreams and hopes of coming days.

"Fancy her watching for me, mother," he said naively, "and waiting till I'm off duty to go out. And we'll be so happy. I'm always so happy when she is near."

CHAPTER XVI.

AUDLEY'S LETTER.

THE next morning Kenard was loitering idly about the garden, when a soldier passed him, carrying the General's letter-bag. As the man saluted him, Kenard turned and followed him to the hall door, feeling however only a very languid interest in the probable contents of the bag.

The General was very particular about his letters, and always unlocked the bag himself. It was therefore carried at once into the library, where he was sitting, and Kenard went there also,

"Here is a letter for you, my boy," said the General, handing him one from amongst his own correspondence; and Kenard saw, as he glanced at the envelope, that it was directed in Audley's handwriting.

He opened it with indifference, but scarcely had he read the first lines when an exclamation burst from his lips, which caused his father to look hastily up at him, and to the General's astonishment he had grown suddenly very pale.

"Anything the matter, Kenard?" asked the General.

But Kenard made no reply; he had staggered back a little, as if the mental shock he had received had reacted on his body; but as his father spoke he pulled himself together, as it were, and without a word walked steadily enough from the room.

The General looked after him somewhat uneasily. "Whatever can be the matter with the lad?" he thought. "Something about that girl, I suppose," he presently concluded, and once more turned his attention to his own letters, reflecting as he did so on the follies young men commit for the sake of that strange absorbing passion, which to him was now as a forgotten dream.

In the meantime, Kenard had gone hastily up to his own bedroom, carrying Audley's letter with him, feeling that it was impossible for him to believe in the evidence of his own senses. For this letter, which had struck him a blow so sharp, so keen, was from Audley, to announce his engagement to Ruth Forth. The man had written it with hard relish, for he was in truth bitterly jealous of Seaforth, and his last interview with Ruth had naturally tended to increase this feeling.

Therefore he was pleased to inflict this wound on the warm-hearted, generous young soldier who had been preferred before him. Audley was a man many women had cared for and loved, and he thought himself very good-looking, which he undoubtedly was. He could not understand, therefore, Ruth's great unwillingness to marry him, and there was a curious mixture of pique and anger mixed with his liking. Other girls had wanted to marry him often enough, but Ruth's coldness to him had only made him more determined to win her. And now he had won her (Seaforth little guessed how), and his hour of triumph had come. So he had lost no time in proclaiming this to

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his rival, and with a strange numbness at his heart, in which great anger, scorn and contempt were mingled with bitter disappointment and pain, Seaforth read and reread the following words :—

“DEAR SEAFORTH,—I’ve got a bit of news for you, and so write a few lines to tell you that after all I am going to make the fatal plunge, and put the noose of matrimony round my neck. I have proposed for, and been accepted by, Miss Ruth Forth, and the old boy has given us his parental blessing, and we are to be married in a fortnight ! There, I hope you think we have lost no time ? But I see no good in waiting, and Miss Forth is of the same mind. Will you come to the wedding ? The Forths, I think, had an idea of both sisters being married on the same day, but I thought this was rather too much of a good thing, and so arranged that my execution takes place first, Col. Kenyon following suit in another fortnight. Beaton goes home to-morrow with his mother, and I think is pulling himself together again. I trust the General and Mrs. Seaforth are very well, and remain,

“Yours faithfully,

“R. AUDLEY.”

“P.S.—If you want further leave, let me know in time.”

It seemed impossible to mistake these words. Unless Audley were mad he never could have written them if they were not true. Yet as the young man gazed at them with his dazed eyes, a wild hope suddenly rushed into his heart that it might, after all, be a practical joke of Audley’s ; for it could not, could not, be that Ruth—his dear, sweet Ruth—would promise to marry one whom she always seemed literally to dislike. To marry in a fortnight ! No, Kenard would not believe it. He started off, therefore, to the nearest telegraph office and sent a telegram to Ruth Forth, as he felt he could not bear the agony of waiting for a letter. He telegraphed :—

“*Is Audley’s news true or false ? Please telegraph back at once.*”

And he waited at the post office until the answer came—only three words—“*It is true,*” and as Kenard read them, hope seemed to die. He sat down and looked so pale that a clerk in the post office asked him if he were ill, and brought him a glass of water, which Kenard eagerly drank. A sharp physical pain had darted into his heart, which

was throbbing violently, and for a few minutes he felt quite overcome. Then a great wave of bitterness swept over him, mingled with intense agony at his loss. He rose numb and cold, and after thanking the clerk in a strangely changed voice, he walked out of the post office and went into the open air.

He shivered as he did so, as if a chill had struck him. It was a bright day, and he made haste to get out of the streets of the little town from which he had sent his telegram to Ruth, and soon found himself in the open country, the green lanes of which were decked in summer garb. But everything seemed black in the young man's heart, and he hated his life as he went along, and cursed the hour that he had been born.

For it is a terrible thing, a cruel, bitter thing, to lose faith in one whom we have truly loved. It makes all the world seem false and valueless, and turns the sweetness of our days to gall, and fills our lips with hard words and scornful laughter. Kenard had naturally a sweet and trustful nature, and he had lived a creditable life, and had believed in the goodness and purity of Ruth Forth with such an earnest belief that the shadow of doubt had never neared it.

And now she was false to him, going to marry another man; and yet she had told him she loved him still, and had wept upon his breast and laid her wet cheek against his. He began recalling the words of their parting interview, and made sure now that she had then been engaged to Audley. He had to be got rid of, he thought bitterly, before her engagement was announced to the richer man. He believed that her sister and father had influenced her to break her faith to him, and he despised her for her weakness, even while that weakness was driving a knife into his own heart.

Easy is it to say we must respect where we love, easy to lay down rules and maxims; but a deep passion is as resistless in its power of joy or pain as the waves of the great sea, and sweeps on by the strength of its own might, though we may call ourselves fools for bending before it. Kenard told himself he was a fool to care for a worthless girl, but all the same he did care. There was a great deal that was simple, brave and chivalrous about him, but his mood was very dark, and he began to wonder if there was

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a true soul in all the earth. He remembered with a curling lip that his mother and father had both lent a more favorable ear to his love for Ruth, after they heard Frances was going to marry Colonel Kenyon. Everyone was the same, he told himself; and why should he make himself miserable because he had found out that Ruth Forth was but like the rest?

Then another change came over him, and the anguish in her eyes, as she last looked at him, flashed back to his mind with such vividness that he began to pity, almost to forgive her. "It is that worldly, wicked sister of hers that has done it," he began to tell himself, "and the poor child is as unhappy, I daresay, as I am. I will write to her—Good heavens! to let her marry Audley!—I will try and stop it at any rate, and if she will let me I'll return to Headfort and see her; we had better run away; anything than this."

And he did write to Ruth before the day was an hour older. A few simple earnest words, asking her to tell him if it were really true that she was about to become Major Audley's wife, and asking what he had done that she should change so quickly to him. "You told me when I last saw you, dearest Ruth," he added, "that we must part, but you told me also that you loved me still. For the sake of that love then, I entreat you to write me some explanation of this, to me, most unaccountable conduct! I cannot help thinking you have been persuaded by others to break faith with me, and before it is too late I entreat of you to trust me. Dear Ruth, I will return to Headfort immediately if you will see me once more. Surely between us we can settle something better than this parting, which is so hard and bitter to me, and I feel sure will bring no happiness to you. I shall impatiently await your reply, and remain, faithfully and affectionately,

"Yours,

"KENARD SEAFORTH."

He waited two days, and then the answer to his letter came. His restlessness and anxiety during these two days was very great, and told both on his health and appearance. His mother's fond eyes, secretly watching him, saw that some great trouble was disturbing his heart,

but as he did not speak of it to her, a feeling of delicacy prevented her inquiring the cause. The General had told her of the letter directed in masculine handwriting, the reading of which had evidently completely upset Kenard, and both parents were uneasy about him. But after two days of miserable suspense all doubts were set at rest. A letter came to him in Ruth Forth's writing, and with a throbbing heart he read words which he knew were final ones.

"DEAR KENARD,—I cannot see you, and if I did it would do no good. Please do not come to Headfort just now, when my marriage is to be so soon, for, believe me, you cannot help me. No one can help me, and we must try to forget how dearly we have loved each other, for if we meet again we must not speak of these things, nor of the happy days that can come no more. I cannot explain my conduct to you, but believe me, no word I ever spoke to you was untrue. Try not to think of me unkindly. You would not, I know, if you knew all.—RUTH."

It was all over then, and, with a bitter laugh at his own folly, Kenard flung Ruth's letter on the floor. She did not wish him to interfere—that was plain enough, he thought—and she should have her own way. He would not go near to disturb the wooing, and when he saw her again she would be Audley's wife. That thought stabbed him, however, keenly as before, and jealousy sharp and cruel filled his heart with burning pain. He would rather that she had died, for then her sweet memory would have been as a religion to his soul, guarding him from evil things; whereas now it was a stinging scourge, driving him to seek forgetfulness in paths his feet had never cared to tread.

To the surprise and grief of his mother, he announced his intention of leaving home the same day as that on which he had received Ruth Forth's letter. He felt, in fact, he could not bear a quiet life with this great unrestfulness tearing at his heartstrings. Mrs. Seaforth looked up in his face, and took courage when she plainly saw the unhappiness stamped there.

"What is it, my dear?" she asked, in her quiet way. "Has anything annoyed you—anything about Miss Forth?"

Then Kenard laughed—a laugh not good to listen to.

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"Miss Forth—Ruth Forth, is to be married in a fortnight," he said contemptuously. "I've wasted a lot of time, mother, on a heartless flirt."

"My dear boy!" and his mother started up, and laid her hand caressingly on his arm, her eyes full of sympathy and tenderness.

But the wound was too recent and too sore for even a mother's love to heed.

"I dare say I am well rid of her," he went on in a hard, scornful way, quite unusual to him. "Audley, whom she is going to marry, is better off than I am, and the highest bidder always wins, they say. However, there's an end of it, and I'm going to town to-night, mother, and I think I'll run over to Paris for a change."

She tried to persuade him not to go, but he went, though she urged him not to do so with many tender words. He went with a heart full of bitterness, of disbelief in good, of recklessness, and a fierce wish to forget the sweet face, which in spite of himself haunted him night and day.

And some six weeks after this, a young wife heard two men talking of him, and what they said made the cold sad pain in her own heart intensify, and its hidden grief burn anew.

"I hear Seaforth is going to the bad at a pretty quick rate," said one, and the other answered with a calm smile.

"I am sorry for that, as he was a nice young fellow; something, or someone, must surely be at the bottom of it?"

And the young wife knew the bitter cause, and her pale face grew paler when she remembered the generous loyal heart that had fallen in its crushing pain; and it seemed to her a sad and cruel thing—a thing which ought never to have been—that he should suffer thus for another's sin.

CHAPTER XVII.

AN ENGAGED COUPLE.

IN the meanwhile, at the little house at Headfort the event was progresssing, the announcement of which had driven Kenard Seaforth from his home, smarting with jealousy and disappointed love. And while he was rushing recklessly into folly, how was it with the poor girl he deemed so false, and yet whose every heart-beat was loyal to him?

On the day that Major Audley had asked Colonel Forth's consent to his marriage with Ruth, no sooner was Audley out of the house, than Colonel Forth summoned Frances into the dining-room, for the more he came to think of it, the more surprising this sudden engagement seemed to him, when he had always supposed that Ruth was not a little attached to another person.

Frances went hastily down to her father, for when unseen she had watched Ruth leave the drawing-room after her interview with Audley was over, there had been something in her face—something so tragic, so intense—that Frances felt absolutely afraid to speak to her, or question her as to what had taken place. But she naturally felt great anxiety to know the result of Major Audley's visit, and her father soon told her.

"Do you know anything about this affair, Frances?" said the Colonel, closing the door after his daughter had entered the dining-room. "Audley has just been here, and he tells me that he and Ruth are engaged, and are absolutely thinking of getting married in a fortnight!"

"In a fortnight?" repeated Frances, slowly, and she began to understand now the expression of Ruth's face.

"Yes, rather quick work, isn't it? And to tell you the truth, I thought it was young Seaforth, not Audley, that Ruth fancied?"

"They both admired her," said Frances with her eyes cast down; "but I suppose she must like Major Audley

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best, if she is going to marry him—well, it's a good match for Ruth."

"Yes, but I think they had better wait a week or two. Suppose they are married on the same day as you and Kenyon, and then one bother and expense will do?"

Frances could not resist a retort to this parental speech.

"You ought not to grudge the expense," she said, "on the happy occasion of getting rid of us both."

Colonel Forth's red face deepened in tint, and he glared angrily at his beautiful daughter.

"Who says I am glad to get rid of you both?" he answered, scowling at her from under his heavy brows. "But you have a most confoundedly disagreeable way of putting things, Frances."

Frances shrugged her fine shoulders.

"It is to be hoped Colonel Kenyon will find my way more agreeable," she said.

It rose in the Colonel's mind to say he pitied Kenyon, which sometimes he did; but he also reflected that Frances would soon be mistress of Sudley Park, and of all the benefits that might accrue therefrom. He therefore suppressed his wrath, and modified his tone.

"What's the good of talking nonsense?" he said. "Of course I don't grudge any expense connected with your marriages, and never have grudged any expense that I could afford for you both. But I'm a poor man, as you know, and could only do what I could. And I think it would be as well for you to propose to Audley to be married at the same time as Kenyon. Ask Ruth what she thinks about it."

"Very well;" and Frances rang for some tea, and presently carried a cup up to Ruth's room. She rapped at the door, and Ruth said "Come in," and when she went in she found Ruth standing with her back to her by the window.

"I have brought you up some tea, Ruth," said Frances, rather in a frightened tone.

"Thank you," answered Ruth, and nothing more, and she did not turn round.

"Father called me down to ask—about Major Audley," hesitated Frances.

"Yes," was the chill response.

"He has spoken to father, it seems, and said that you and he are to be married—directly."

"Yes, in a fortnight," and Ruth did now turn round and face her sister. "He fixed it so."

"But you ought to have something to do, surely, with the fixing of the wedding day?"

"I have nothing to do with it at all. What matter is it?"

And there was such misery in her voice, such misery in her white rigid face, that Frances felt very guilty and ashamed.

"I—am afraid you are not very happy, Ruth?" she faltered.

"*Happy!*" echoed Ruth; "I told you before I would rather be dead; but it's no good talking of it. He has fixed it all. Don't speak of it again until the time comes."

"But Ruth, my dear, dear child, we can't do that," said Frances pleadingly. "It makes me miserable to see you unhappy, and to feel that I am to blame; but we cannot help ourselves. I am no happier than you are, and the more I see of Colonel Kenyon the more tiresome I find him; yet of course I am going to marry him all the same."

"We are a nice pair," said Ruth bitterly.

"We are what circumstances have made us, and we must just try to make the best of things. But it is absurd, and father thinks so too, to let Audley have all his own way. Suppose you and I are married on the same day? That will be in a month, and surely that is quite early enough?"

"Do you think you could persuade him to wait?" asked Ruth, like a poor culprit grasping at the hope of a reprieve.

"Of course he will wait; I shall speak to him, and settle about it."

"Oh, if he would," and suddenly Ruth flung herself on the bed, and hid her face with her hands. "I hate him, Frances!" she cried, "and he will learn to hate me. I told him to-day that nothing but misery could come of it, and nothing will—nothing, nothing else!"

Frances did not speak; her heart echoed Ruth's words, for she, too, hated Audley, and regarded his forcing her poor young sister to marry him against her will as a most cruel and ungentlemanly act.

"I wonder what he thinks," went on Ruth, rocking herself despairingly to and fro. "He must know that to be

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married to a woman who loves someone else, who is always thinking of someone else, could only end one way. Yet he persists in it ; he said—mean wretch—that if I did not keep my bargain he would not keep his, and that then Colonel Kenyon would never marry you, and poor Kenard's people would never let him marry me."

"There is no help for it," said Frances in a low tone.

"No, none—but if he would put it off for a little while—even for a week, it would be something. But I don't believe he will ; he said he would be married before Colonel Kenyon, and I believe he will keep his word."

"I'll try to persuade him, at all events," said Frances.

"Come, Ruth, drink your tea, and I'll see Audley first when he comes, for I suppose he'll come to-morrow."

Ruth eagerly drank the half-cold tea, for her lips were dry and parched, and there was a throbbing pain in her head, and an intense sense of oppression and weariness over her whole body.

"Kenard will know to-morrow," she said presently, "and—and he will suffer too."

"Oh, he'll get over it ; don't distress yourself about him," answered Frances ; "men have a wonderful way of getting over these things—and yet not all."

She was thinking of Arthur Beaton, and the wild, passionate, reproachful words he had given Seaforth to convey to her. Seaforth had enclosed these to Frances before he left Headfort, but Frances had said nothing about this to Ruth. But they had made her feel a little impatient with her grey-haired lover. There was a certain vein of recklessness about her, curiously intermixed with worldliness and self-seeking. And personal beauty was a powerful influence with her, and she admired Arthur Beaton's handsome features and gray, soul-lit, passionate eyes.

"Ah, why is he not rich," she had thought ; and she had also thought that the two hours which Colonel Kenyon had spent during the afternoon before in the drawing-room had seemed very long.

"I believe he will turn out very tiresome," she had reflected, with a sigh, after he was gone ; "he wants me to interest myself in things in which I have no interest—but I suppose he will tire of it by-and-bye."

And Beaton's letter had increased this feeling. This deep love, strong as death, which had made the young

man's life seem a burden to him, was worth having, Frances thought, and she began speculating about the time Beaton would probably return to Headfort if he went on sick leave now, and wondering if he would come to Sudley Park when she was mistress there.

Therefore, when she was railing against the inconstancy of men to Ruth, she thought of Beaton, and how she had blighted his young life. It pleased her to think this, though she had been truly sorry about his "accident" and the sufferings he had gone through. But she did not mention his name to Ruth. She went on talking of what she would say to Audley, and settled in her own mind that it would be far the best arrangement for them both to be married on the same day.

And she carried out her intention when Audley arrived on the following afternoon. She felt rather afraid to face him, but she had promised Ruth to ask him to defer his marriage for a little while, and she meant to keep her word.

Thus, when Audley expected his young betrothed to enter the drawing-room, to his surprise the beautiful Frances came in. She held out her hand to him with a smile, and as Audley took it he smiled too ; but it was not a pleasant smile.

"Well, I hear I must congratulate you," said Frances, feeling rather uneasy beneath the bold, light, prominent eyes fixed on her face ; "that you are to be my brother-in-law?"

"It is a great honor to me," answered Audley, and something in his tone, in his gaze, made Frances wince afresh.

"I suppose you mean the other way," she said, trying to assume her ordinary coquettish manner ; "but we need not pay each other compliments. I am sure you are a very lucky man to have won Ruth, and I need not say I hope you will both be very happy. But about the time of your marriage? Ruth says you wish it to be very soon, but I want her to be married on the same day that I am, and I hope you will consent to this?"

"For certain reasons, Miss Forth, I wish to be married *before* Colonel Kenyon."

Audley said this with cool deliberateness, and Frances felt the blood rush to her face in a surging tide, but dared not say "But why?"

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"But we both wish it so much," she faltered, with her eyes cast on the carpet.

"I am, of course, very sorry to disappoint your wishes, especially when I know there is such a strong bond between you, but upon this point you must excuse me, Miss Forth, if I am firm. Ruth agreed to marry me in a fortnight, and I shall expect her to keep her word."

"And you won't be over-persuaded?"

"Certainly not."

"I am afraid you are a very obstinate man," said Frances, endeavoring to smile.

"I am a determined one, at all events," he answered, adding a moment later, "and I am sure you, who understand my motive for this decision so well, will make no further effort to change it."

"Very well," and again Frances tried to smile, but it was a very poor effort. "I had better send Ruth to you," she went on, feeling that she could no longer endure his steady half-scornful gaze; and as she left the room. Alley shrugged his broad shoulders, and his smile deepened.

"Ah, my fair Jezebel," he was thinking, "you must not forget I have the whip hand of you; you must ~~not~~ try to manage me."

And at this moment, with a keen sense of humiliation and suppressed rage in her heart, the woman he thought of as "Jezebel" was speaking to her sister upstairs.

"It's no use, Ruth," she was saying impatiently, and the pale face she was almost ashamed to look at grew a little paler, and that was all.

"I did not expect it would be," answered Ruth in a low, pained tone; and yet it was really a bitter blow, for how often do we children of trouble hope against hope? If an evil thing be looming in the distance, we cling vaguely to the idea that something may happen to prevent its close approach, even though, humanly speaking, we know there will not. And this feeling had lingered in Ruth's heart, regarding the brief fourteen days beyond which she had hoped her hated marriage might be deferred.

"He wishes to see you," went on Frances, still impatiently. "I told him I thought he was a very obstinate man, and so he is."

Ruth made no reply to this. She drew a long, quivering breath, and slowly left the room, and a minute or two

later entered the drawing-room, where Major Audley was.

He shook hands with her, and then said, not unkindly :

"So you sent your sister down to me, to try to put off our marriage for a fortnight?"

"We wish to be married on the same day," replied Ruth, without raising her eyes.

"And I don't wish to be married on the same day," said Audley; "and Ruth, if you ever have another request to make to me, don't send your sister to make it; you would have far more chance if you came yourself."

"Will you now, then——"

"Not about this," interrupted Audley. "Our wedding-day is fixed—yesterday fortnight—and there can be no change about that; but I do not say I shall always say No to what you ask me. It will depend on yourself, little woman, to make me a good husband or a bad one."

Ruth said nothing; she moved away from him and sat down on a chair by the window, and Audley followed her, and laid his hand on her shrinking shoulder.

"I think you ought to be a little more agreeable to me when we are to be married so soon," he said.

"You have chosen your own fate," answered Ruth.

"I know that very well, but it rests with you whether it be a pleasant or an unpleasant fate; I do not always wish to feel as if I were sitting near a refrigerator."

But Ruth did not smile; her head drooped a little lower, and she turned it away, so that Audley could only see her delicate profile and her soft light brown hair.

He stood looking down at her a moment or two in silence, and then he pushed some of the brown curls aside that rested on her brow.

"I wish you had not been so pretty, Ruth," he said, half-bitterly. "I should not have married you then."

CHAPTER XVIII.

COUNTING THE DAYS.

VERY few of us realise that each passing moment is gone for ever, though we all know it. It is only when we are face to face with some great event of joy or pain that we

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count the days first and then the hours. Ruth Forth began to count the days which had come to twelve, on the morning, in the pale dawn, after Audley's second visit. Only twelve days! She got up on a lovely summer morning, the pink cloudlets of sunrise tinting the sky, and drew up the window blind, and brought out her little almanac, and read there the record of days that were gone by and days that were to come. She had to be married on the second of August, and this was July the twenty-second, and to-morrow would be the twenty-third, and so on swift time would pass away!

And the winged hours fled, and noons merged into eventides, and eventides to dewy nights; and then another dawn stole over the silent, sleeping world, and the pale girl who was not sleeping, who was watching for the coming light, which brought her nearer and nearer to an abhorred fate, saw the rising of the sun with a shudder and a moan, and hid her face many a time on her pillow to shut out his rays.

Another day gone! Ah, reader, have you ever cried this in the anguish of your soul? "The noiseless foot of Time" treading so heavily on your heart that you wished you had never seen the light? If not, you can scarcely understand the misery of Ruth Forth, as she lay reckoning the few days left to her; the last few days before she was forced into her loveless marriage.

Even her father, sour as he was, and anxious as he was that his daughters should marry well, began to understand that there was something wrong with Ruth.

"I don't understand you girls," he said, pettishly, to Frances; "there's Ruth, looking much more like going to be hanged than going to be married, and yet no one ever asked her or urged her to marry Audley? At least, I didn't, and that I can safely say, for I was never so astonished in my life as when he told me he was engaged to her. What is it all about?"

"Oh, she's all right," answered Frances, and the Colonel saw very well he was not to be taken into their confidence. He, however, gave Frances a hundred pounds to "throw away on wedding finery," as he called it; and Colonel Kenyon, also, slipped a cheque for the same amount into Frances' slim white hand.

"My dear," he said, tenderly, when she prettily demur-

red, "all that I have is yours; this is your gift to your young sister; I shall bring mine by-and-by."

And he did bring it, and for the first time in her life Ruth Forth was the possessor of shining stones and gold circlets. There was a heavy diamond ring on her slender third finger now, that her bridegroom elect had placed there, and he brought her a diamond necklace and other gauds, but they did not make her heart less heavy.

And Audley saw this, and it enraged him and embittered him that he could not win her love.

"Can she be pining after that young fool, Seaforth?" he thought, jealously; and these wooing days of his were not happy ones for him also.

One more appeal Ruth made to him, and only one; and this was like the rest, in vain. He was sitting beside her, three days before their wedding, and, after looking at her shadowed face for a few moments, he said, impatiently:

"I wish you would look a little happier, Ruth."

"I am not happy," she answered, and she raised her grey eyes and looked straight at him, and he understood their silent reproach.

"I wish to make you happy," he said, starting to his feet, yet more impatiently; "but you persist in making a martyr of yourself—you are not wise, Ruth, you will rouse the devil in me presently."

"I cannot seem what I am not," she said, gravely and sadly, "and you know very well what you are doing. Before it is too late, will you end what can bring you no happiness?"

"No," answered Audley, loudly and passionately; and the veins on his temples started; "no, a thousand times no! If you don't love me, I love you; and I mean to marry you whether you love me or not, and unless you are a very foolish girl you will try to make the best of it. I gave you fair warning; you can make or mar me, and I am not a good man to cross."

Ruth did not speak. What was the use of saying anything, she thought.

"Love comes often to people after they are married," he continued, a few moments later, and again he sat down by her side; and with an air of ownership, hateful to Ruth, he put his arm around her slender form. "My little girl, there is nothing very bad about me, you know;

I am not an old man, nor a hunchback, nor particularly ugly for that matter, and though I don't think you deserve it at my hands, when you worry me by looking as unhappy as possible, still I really mean to make you happy, if I can. Let us kiss, and be friends, Ruth—this is Monday, and on Thursday we shall be married; so, as I said before, you may as well make the best of it."

He bent down and kissed her, but her cold lips made no response, and her cheeks did not flush, but grew only a little paler and colder; and he, whose love had been met with love, and on whom many women had smiled, turned in hot anger away, enraged that this girl's heart was as hard to him as if bound by bands of steel.

It was in truth bound from him by something stronger than steel; by something unseen, yet living; an image palpable and potent to her, if half-forgotten by those around her; for never for one moment did the memory of the love of Kenard Seasforth leave her, though she was just about to wed another man.

And the night before her marriage she dreamt of him—a dream so vivid, so clear, that it ever afterwards seemed to her that in the dark dim hours of night his soul, his spirit—whatever is the immortal part of us—had passed away for a time from its earthly form, and had come to her in reproach and pain.

She saw him distinctly, and he came near to her, and looked at her with eyes full of sorrow, and she bent forward and kissed him, and then she heard him speak.

"What! you have kissed me?" he said, as if surprised, and still reproachful, and she answered, "It will make no change in my heart to you, Kenard, none, none;" and they clasped each others hands as a silent covenant between them, that in their hearts there could be no change.

She awoke with this scene so impressed upon her mind, its realism so clear, so certain, that she believed that their spirits had indeed met, and that there was now a bond between them which death even could not break, and it was a sort of comfort to her; some time at least he would know, she thought, that she was not false.

An hour later Frances came into the room, and the stir of the approaching wedding began. And the pale bride rose, and dressed herself in the white shining gown pre-

pared for her, and the soft floating veil fell around her, and she looked young and fair, and was very quiet, and went up the church aisle leaning on her father's arm, followed by her beautiful radiant sister, at whose side was Colonel Kenyon.

It was a very quiet wedding, and yet the village church was full, and people on all sides were craning their necks to see the bride's face, and talked of her, and whispered, forgetting they were in the house of God. And the bridegroom? Major Audley, accompanied by a brother officer, had arrived at the church a few minutes before the appointed hour, and met the small bridal party as they entered, looking smiling and *débonnaire*, but Ruth never looked up as he clasped her cold hand.

And presently the two knelt down together, and false vows were exchanged, and promises whose very essence was a lie. Perhaps some foreshadow of evil crossed Audley's heart, for his expression suddenly changed, and a hard, almost savage look came over his face. Did he remember he was doing a cruel wrong, and had wrung a promise from the pale woman beside him by unmanly threats? If such thoughts crossed his heart, they did not make him look amiable, but self-shame has a very biting sting.

But the words were spoken which the cold shadow of death, or the strain of shame, alone can efface. Richard promised to take Ruth, to love and to cherish, and Ruth promised to take Richard, and so there was an end of it; and after the ceremony the officiating clergyman made haste to get off his surplice so as to be ready to go with his wife—who was waiting for him in a new bonnet—to join the wedding feast.

For a small party had been asked to breakfast, and amongst them was the Rev. John Appleby, who was "a little, round, fat, oily man," who was married to a tall, gaunt, somewhat grim-faced lady, whose attractions, however, were of a more solid and lasting description than mere looks. The easiest way for a man to win fortune is no doubt to marry one, and the Rev. John Appleby had wisely considered this, and when he undertook a cure of souls, was most interested in the souls that we are told have the least chance of entering the Kingdom of Heaven. And the result of this was that he married the richest and

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ugliest young, or rather middle-aged, woman who went to his church. But the good man knew that in this world we cannot expect everything, and though he liked to look at a pretty face as well as his neighbors, he was also aware that a pretty face won't pay rent, taxes, etc., and provide good dinners; and no face to his mind could be put in comparison with all these things.

He made his choice and he was satisfied on the whole with his lot. A rich woman, however, is somewhat apt to remind a poor man of what he owes her, and Mrs. Appleby was not above this weakness, and people said the parson did not always repose on a bed of roses. At all events he had waxed fat, and did not overwork himself, and when his wife was not near to hear him, had his laugh and his joke with every good-looking girl that came in his way. He admired both Frances and Ruth Forth, and had many a time sung their praises after they came to Headfort. So they asked him to the wedding breakfast, and Miss Hilliard and one or two others were also invited.

And these invitations had been eagerly accepted, and eagerly sought for. The star of the Forths was considered to be in the ascendant, and as in the great city so in the village. There was nothing said now about Frances Forth, except that no doubt she was very handsome. The women who had sneered at her sneered at her no more, for they wished to go to the dinners and garden parties at Sudley Park, and so took very good care not to imperil their chances of doing this.

And Frances Forth saw the change and smiled in her mocking way, and tried not to look weary of the noble gentleman whose heart she had won. It was very sad! Here was a man young in heart still, "though grey do somewhat mingle with our younger brown," a man who at least had retained his early chivalrous feeling for women, gently fostered by his own love for his dead mother, and for the fair girl who slept in her maiden grave—now kneeling at the feet of a false idol, and worshipping a woman whose heart was stone to him.

He in fact wearied her inexpressibly. His schemes for their future life, the good deeds they were to do together, the tears they were to dry, bored Frances to such an extent that she found the greatest difficulty not to yawn in his face! She was one of those, also, who care very little

for love they are sure of. Had Colonel Kenyon shown the slightest symptom of change, Frances would immediately have been up in arms, eager to retain him, or win him back to his old allegiance. But this brave and generous gentleman made no such sign. It pleased him to fling his heart in passionate prodigality down before her, judging of her nature from the lofty instincts of his own.

And as he sat beside her at the wedding breakfast, the guests around saw she had all her own way with the owner of Sudley, and respected her accordingly. And presently the Rev. John Appleby, vicar of Headfort, got on his feet to propose the health of the bride and bridegroom, and in flowery and verbose language complimented both sisters on their beauty, having an eye also to future benefits to be derived from Sudley.

"Seldom is it," said the Rev. John, "that two sisters are so greatly gifted by nature as the fair daughters of my friend and hospitable host, Colonel Forth. We have just witnessed the happy nuptials of the younger one, now wedded to the husband of her choice, the gallant and distinguished soldier seated by her side; and ere many weeks pass, Miss Frances Forth will also, I believe, be led to the altar, by one so well known to us all for his generosity and hospitality, and a hundred other good qualities, which belong to our neighbor, the wealthy and noble owner of Sudley Park." Here he bowed to Colonel Kenyon, who smilingly returned the compliment; and then the Rev. John went on with his discourse, and finally ended by proposing the health of Major and Mrs. Audley, to which toast the company warmly responded.

Major Audley rose to reply with a somewhat grim smile, and a gleam of satire in his full light eyes.

"My poor words fail me," he said, "to reply to so much eloquence, so you must kindly excuse a blunt soldier; but at the same time I thank you heartily for all your good wishes for my young wife and myself;" and then he sat down, and after this there was no more speech-making, as neither Colonel Forth nor Colonel Kenyon felt themselves called upon "to make fools of themselves," as Colonel Forth designated the flowery language of weddings.

And by-and-bye Major Audley whispered a few words in Ruth's ear, who rose and left the table, followed by her sister and the rest of the ladies present. Frances accom-

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panied these into the drawing-room, but Ruth went straight up to her own bedroom, and having locked the door, she drew out the photograph of Kenard Seaforth, meaning to bid it a last farewell.

Long she gazed at the smiling pleasant face, and the grey eyes that had always looked at her in love and kindness. Long—and then in sudden and passionate emotion—she pressed it and strained it to her breast, meaning to destroy it before she left Headfort. But she had not strength; it was beyond her to mar the pictured features that in reality had been and were so dear to her. Again she kissed it, again looked at it, her heart in her eyes, murmuring below her breath as she did so:—

“Good-bye, Kenard, but not for ever;” and with these solemn words hid it away; a few minutes later giving the locked desk where she had placed it into the charge of Frances.

“Keep it for me until I come back,” she said, quietly, and Frances promised.

And half an hour later she left her old home and the days of her girlhood behind her, and when Frances saw the carriage disappear which was bearing her away, she breathed a sigh of relief.

“Thank heaven, the secret is safe now,” thought the elder sister; and she thought very little of the wrecked life and the broken heart her sin had caused.

CHAPTER XIX.

LEFT ALONE.

As Frances turned away after watching the bride's departure, she found Colonel Kenyon by her side, who, not reading aright the grave expression of her face, thought she was grieving for the loss of her sister.

“You must let me be all in all to you now, dearest,” he said to her in a low tone, and Frances looked up in his face and smiled.

“Yes,” she answered, softly, and then went back among the wedding guests, delighting everyone with the bright

courtesy of her manner, even while she was wishing them all out of the house.

At last they went away.

"Delightful people!" said the Vicar with unction, as he tucked his tall lady's long gaunt arm through his short fat one.

"Miss Forth certainly is handsome," grudgingly admitted Mrs. Appleby.

"No doubt of it, my dear; and her looks have gained her a splendid position. How did you think I put that little allusion to Colonel Kenyon's engagement? Not bad was it, and it evidently pleased him?"

"I scarcely call it an 'allusion,'" replied Mrs. Appleby, who liked to find fault.

"Well, whatever it was, I think I hit the right nail on the head," smiled the Vicar, pleased at his own wit; "and it's always well to keep on good terms with wealthy people, they have so much in their power, and I intend asking Colonel Kenyon to subscribe to the repairs of the Church, and other little things besides."

"I did not think the bride looked particularly happy," suggested Mrs. Appleby, "but of course this is between ourselves."

"Only the natural modesty of a young creature taking so serious a step, I think. Yes, my dear, I consider Colonel Forth and his daughters a decided addition to our little society here, and I am glad that we always treated them with proper consideration, for see how well they have done!"

And as the Vicar thought, so now thought the other inhabitants of Headfort. "They had done well," and all the rest—their poverty, the scandal about Frances Forth, were forgotten or spoken of only with bated breath.

And as the days went on after Ruth's marriage, there were rumors in the village of the splendid gifts that Col. Kenyon had given his promised wife; of the new furnishing of the drawing-room at Sudley Park, and the new carriage which had come down from town, ordered expressly for Frances. She had plenty of money now at her command, and spent it with a lavish hand even among the village tradespeople, and they naturally spoke well of her. She liked, in fact, to spend money and to be thought a great lady, and was generous enough to give, if it cost her

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nothing. These were days of triumph, and she liked the court paid to her, and the dresses that made her more beautiful, and all the good things that Colonel Kenyon's love had given her. Only the man himself did not suit her, for between their natures was a great gulf fixed, which it took all Frances' cleverness not to show.

Her marriage had been settled to take place exactly one fortnight after Ruth's, and Ruth had naturally expected to be present at it. But to Frances' great anger she found that Major Audley declined to return to Headfort so soon. The newly-married pair were in Paris, and Ruth wrote from thence to tell Frances she could not come.

"MY DEAREST FRANCES" (wrote the bride), "I received your letter telling me about your wedding, and all the beautiful things which Colonel Kenyon had given you. But I am very, very sorry to tell you that if you are to be married on the 16th, I shall not be able to be present. Major Audley will not hear of returning to Headfort until his leave is up, which will not be until the first week in September, and therefore you see I have no choice. I am forwarding *my* wedding present to you to-day, and I hope you will like it. We are going on to Trouville to-morrow, and I shall write to you from there. With kind love to my father and yourself,

"Affectionately yours,

"RUTH AUDLEY."

Frances read these few cold, guarded lines, and flung Ruth's letter passionately on the floor.

"Horrid, selfish man!" she exclaimed, and she could not even hide her indignation against Audley from her lover.

"Would you believe it possible," she said to him a few hours later, "that Major Audley will not allow Ruth to return in time for our wedding? It is too disgusting, isn't it?"

"It seems rather odd, certainly," answered Colonel Kenyon. "I thought it was settled when they went away that they were to be back by then."

"So did I, of course; but it is just like Audley; he is odiously selfish."

Colonel Kenyon gave a little shrug and smiled.

"Yet you consented to his marriage with your young sister, Frances?"

"Yes," said Frances, hastily, who saw she had made a mistake, "because Ruth seemed to wish it."

"Well, to tell you the truth, I never thought Ruth did particularly wish it. I always fancied she liked young Seaforth?"

"Perhaps they quarrelled; Ruth was very reticent about some things; at all events it was her own choice to marry Major Audley, so I suppose we shall just have to make the best of him; but I am feeling very cross with him to-day, so that made me abuse him;" and Frances smiled and changed the conversation.

And if she was indignant about Major Audley's conduct, Colonel Forth was even more so.

"I don't like such behavior at all," he said, angrily. "I fully expected that Ruth and he would have stayed on here with me after you were gone, until they got a house of their own, and now I shall be left alone! Extremely selfish of Audley, I must say; and it augurs very badly to my mind for Ruth's future happiness."

Frances gave a little sneering laugh.

"Selfishness is a general characteristic of the nobler sex, you know," she said, "but I must say it is highly developed in Major Audley. However, what's the good of talking of it? I should write to him if I did not know it would be of no use, he is so obstinate; and as Colonel Kenyon does not wish to put off our wedding, I must just be married without Ruth."

And perhaps after all she was not sorry that Audley's cold sarcastic eyes would not be fixed upon her as she plighted her troth to Colonel Kenyon. As it was, there would be no one present to remind her of a bitter past. Therefore, after her first disappointment was over, Frances went on with her preparations without wasting any further time in abusing her brother-in-law.

Her marriage, like Ruth's, had to be a quiet one, but Frances could not resist (with that taste for magnificence which was natural to her) decking herself out to the utmost advantage. She chose a wedding-dress of white velvet, knowing well that straight, sweeping lines of rich material suited her fine form better than lace or gauze. And the night before her wedding she dressed herself as she would be dressed on the morrow, and came down unexpectedly into the dining-room to show herself, where her

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father and Colonel Kenyon were sitting, both in a very amiable frame of mind, discussing some old port that had lain for years in the cellars at Sudley, but which had been now sent as an offering to his future father-in-law by the Colonel, who was partial to this wine.

She opened the door and went in smilingly, a white shining vision of loveliness, and both the men looked at her for a moment in silent admiration.

"What do you think of me in my war paint?" she said, in her bright gay way; and Colonel Kenyon rose as she spoke, and went towards her and took her hand.

"Well?" asked Frances, with her brilliant hazel eyes fixed on his face, as if demanding some tribute from his lips.

"Don't flatter her, Kenyon," said her father from the table.

"I could not flatter her," he answered, looking at her with such tenderness, such chivalrous devotion in his expression, that Frances drooped her eyes with a little conscious blush.

"Don't look as if you thought I was an angel," she said, half in earnest, half in jest; "remember I am only a frivolous young woman," and before he could prevent her she had left the room.

"She is a grand creature," said Colonel Kenyon, as he returned to his seat, with a look of great content on his fine face.

"She's a handsome girl, there's no doubt of it," replied her father; "but don't you spoil her, Kenyon; always remain master in your own house."

"I could not spoil her, just as I could not flatter her," answered Kenyon loyally; and as he spoke, so the man felt in his inmost heart.

And the next day, when they knelt side by side on the very same spot where Ruth had made her false vows two weeks ago, there was no one in all the world with whom Colonel Kenyon would have changed places. And after all, was he not to be envied! Great happiness often ends in bitter pain, for the old primeval curse treads still on the heel of man, and if we drink the cup of joy, there is sorrow in the dregs. But is it not something to be very happy, even for a short time? To rise above the dead level of our daily life, and touch that higher sense of exis-

tence, that expansion of the soul, which maybe is but a foretaste of everlasting joy?

And Hugh Kenyon felt this as he plighted his troth to the beautiful woman he loved with such entire faith and trust, that no shadow nor doubt rested for a moment in his heart. He knew his life had stolen on to middle age, while she was in her bright prime; but even this did not disturb him. Love is immortal, he believed; therefore what were a few years more or less between two who hoped and trusted to share an existence together which Time could not approach?

And the bride? She glanced at her bridegroom more than once, with even a sort of pity in her wayward and luxurious heart.

"Poor man!" she was thinking, as she saw the rapt look in Colonel Kenyon's face as he made his vows to her; vows which he thought to be binding for ever to his soul and hers.

And there were others in the church who in their secret hearts also thought "Poor man!" as they looked at the grey-haired bridegroom and blooming bride. But they discreetly kept this mental appellation to themselves, or only murmured it in some trusted ear. "It was a splendid match for her," they said; and her father's heart echoed this, and with no small pride he remembered as he saw her rise from her knees Colonel Kenyon's wedded wife, that Frances was now a rich woman, and that he had done well for his children, and that they ought to show him no end of gratitude.

And he shook his old friend's hand warmly, and even expressed his pleasure in not ill-chosen words.

"If I had sought the world over, I should have chosen you for her, Kenyon," he said, with an unusual warmth and glow in his sour being.

"I pray God I may be worthy of her," answered Kenyon, with the solemnity of deep feeling, returning his hand clasp; and both thought at this moment of the old life-tie between them, the tie which now had grown so close.

Yet the day did not pass before Colonel Forth had his grumble, for it was his nature to carp and find fault with fortune, and look out for specks and blemishes wherever they could be found. The bride and bridegroom were gone, and so were most of the wedding guests, but the

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Vicar still lingered, for he loved good cheer, and did not often taste such champagne as Colonel Kenyon's generous hand had provided.

Therefore he was in no haste to go, and began again touching on the many excellent gifts possessed by the bridegroom.

"Yes, that's all very well," said Colonel Forth, in that crusty way of his. "I've nothing to say against Kenyon, certainly not; but here am I, left alone."

"That is certainly so," answered the oily voice of the Vicar; "the marriages of your two beautiful daughters are at once a blessing and a trial; a symbol, as it were, of the mixed nature of our existence, in which joy and sorrow are so strangely intermingled."

"That's true enough," answered Colonel Forth, remembering how anxious he had been for the two girls to marry, though now they had done so he was beginning to be afraid he would feel very dull without them.

"Still we must prepare our minds for these, I may say, happy partings; as our children grow up around us they naturally take wing like the birds."

"Humph," grunted the Colonel.

"And, my dear sir, why do you not take to yourself a second wife, a second help-mate? I am sure there are many charming ladies whose first youth perhaps has glided away, who would be too happy to share your distinguished name, and might even bring a little grist to the mill." And Mr. Appleby smiled benignly.

"Not I," answered Colonel Forth, with decision. "I've had enough of that kind of thing, I can tell you, and making love to old women for their money is quite out of my way. No, I must just put up with it; it will be confoundedly dull without the girls, and this is a dull place at the best, but I must try to get along somehow, for what can a man do, forced to retire by those beastly regulations, as I was, in the very prime of life? But I tell you what it will end in—the service will go to pieces, and where will the country be then?"

CHAPTER XX.

TWO BRIDES.

COLONEL FORTH had plenty of opportunity of grumbling during the next few weeks, for his son-in-law, Major Audley, wrote to him from Trouville to ask him to seek and engage a house (a furnished one) for himself and Ruth to go into the first week in September.

The Colonel swore long and loudly at such a request.

"Confound him, does he think I am going to run after him, or do his errands for him like a footman! Monstrous! Why can't he come to the hotel, and then seek a house for himself?"

He went with his grievance to the Vicar, but Mr. Appleby was a man of peace, and loved to throw oil on troubled waters.

"Just a young man's thoughtlessness, my friend—nothing more," he smiled.

"He's not a young man; he's forty if he's a day, and should know better than to ask *me* to run his confounded errands," growled the irate Colonel.

"Let me see," said the Vicar, contemplatively; "there has been a rumour that the Bells wish to spend the winter abroad, on account of the delicate health of Miss Julia Bell. Shall I sound the old lady? I shall be happy to lend any assistance in my power to procure your charming daughter a pleasant home."

"The Bells' house is not a bad one, I should say," answered the Colonel, somewhat appeased; and so he was led into house-hunting, a task trying even to a good-tempered man.

He got one at last, after an incredible amount of grumbling, raging, and worrying. Luckily, Major Audley had not limited him to price, and to give the Vicar his due he was a good-natured man, and did his best for his neighbors as long as it did not put him out of his way. He thought more in fact of the welfare of his rich parish-

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ioners than his poor ones, for he loved not unwholesome alleys and foul smells.

"I cannot bear to have my feelings harrowed," he once told his pale-faced earnest young curate, who was striving with all his poor might to keep on the straight path, and was horrified at the easy self-indulgence of his chief; "I am too sensitive to go into painful scenes."

But he liked to go into pleasant drawing-rooms, and indulge in semi-flirtations with old, middle-aged, and young ladies alike. It pleased him to give advice in delicate family affairs, and he would gently hold the hand as he plied soothing phrases to the ear. And he was guarded in speech and wise in his generation, and he managed to get a house for Major Audley and Ruth, on much better terms than the irascible Colonel would have done.

And during the first week of September, Major Audley's leave by this time being exhausted, Ruth and he returned to Headfort, and the Colonel went to the railway station to receive his daughter. And he saw a pretty, sad-faced, woman, whose features were familiar to him but whose expression was not. And, seated opposite to her, was Audley, and there was a cloud on his brow also. Yet he met the Colonel jovially enough, with ready smiles and outstretched hand, which Forth returned somewhat grimly, for he had not quite got over his grudge about the house yet.

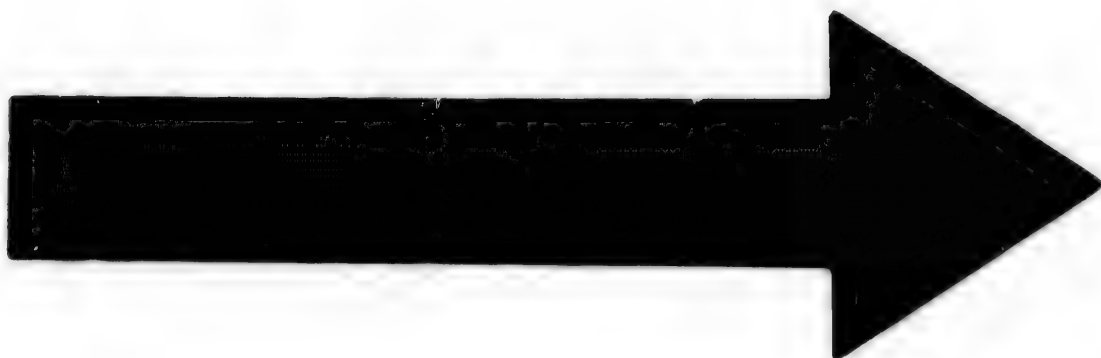
"Well, and how did you enjoy Trouville?" he asked of his daughter, as they stood together on the platform, while Major Audley was directing his soldier servant about the luggage.

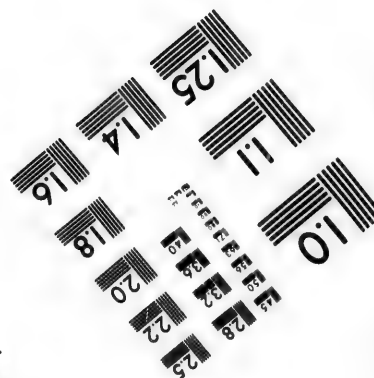
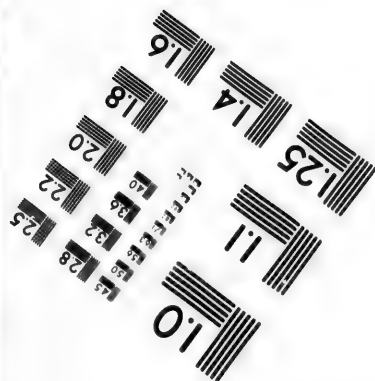
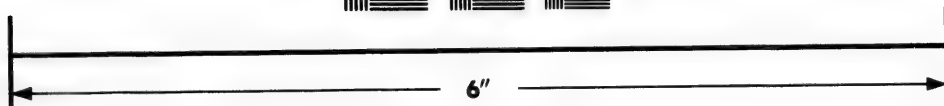
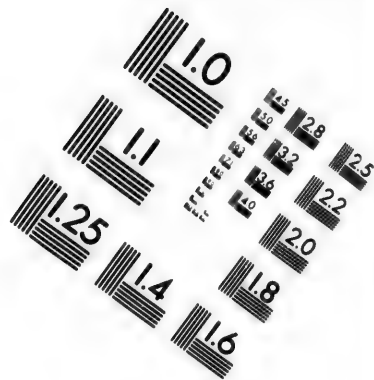
"It is a very gay place," was the quiet reply.

"Humph!" ejaculated the Colonel, looking furtively from under his shaggy brows at the sad face by his side. He did not like Ruth's look somehow, and felt unreasonably irritated against Audley, who presently came up to them, and said carelessly:—

"Are you ready, Ruth? The traps will follow, and I've got a cab to take us to the house; so I suppose we must say good morning, Colonel?"

He made no offer nor hint of asking the Colonel to accompany them to their new abode, at which the Colonel felt naturally aggrieved after all the trouble he had gone through to get it for them. Nor did Ruth ask her father





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to dine with them, or even to drop in during the evening, which he also naturally expected.

"Will you be at home to-morrow morning, father?" she asked, pausing for a moment as Audley was handing her into the cab.

"Yes, I'll be at home. Will you come?"

"I'll call about twelve o'clock then," said Ruth, and she smiled and nodded as the cab drove away, but the smile was very sad, and somehow the Colonel understood his young daughter had a heavy heart.

"Well, how do you think the old boy looks?" said Audley to her, as they drove on from the station.

"Just the same," answered Ruth. She was gazing with a far-away look in her eyes out of the cab window, thinking how the familiar objects they were passing seemed strangely unfamiliar. The same shops, the same houses she had passed hundreds of times, and yet they seemed changed. And as they went down High-street she saw her father's little house standing in the garden from the road, and she remembered Kenard Seaforth riding up to the gateway the morning after the storm, and the very look in his eyes as he sat on his horse smiling down at her, asking her for one of her freshly-cut flowers; and as she thought of these things she sighed.

"I must say, Ruth, you are a very entertaining companion," said Audley the next moment with some harshness.

"What is it?" she answered, looking round. "I was thinking of other things; I did not hear."

Audley gave a bitter laugh.

"You are extremely conjugal in your attention, my dear!"

A pained look came over her face.

"What is the good of saying these things?" she said gently. "I am sorry I was not listening. Naturally returning to Headfort——"

"With all its pleasing recollections," scoffed Audley.

"With its painful recollections," said Ruth. "But it's better to forget them all. I wonder which the house is they have taken for us?"

"Why, confound it," cried Audley, putting his head out of the cab window, "here we are close to the Fort! Driver, have you not passed 47 High-street?"

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"No, sir," answered the driver from the box ; " 47 is the last house but one on the left side ; we'll be there in a minute or two ; " and accordingly in a minute or two he pulled up before a substantial red brick house, close to the gates of the Fort, before which a sentry was pacing on duty.

"It's far too near the Fort," grumbled Audley, as he descended from the cab and handed out Ruth, the house door being opened by a neat handmaiden that Mrs. Appleby the Vicar's wife, had engaged.

It was a good house, roomy and old-fashioned, and belonged to a widow lady and her two maiden daughters. One of these ladies was threatened with bronchitis, and the chill sea breezes of winter were considered too trying for her, and they had therefore let their house for six months, and had been glad to get such tenants as Major and Mrs. Audley promised to be.

Ruth walked slowly up the broad staircase while her husband was paying the cab, and went into the drawing-room, which had an old world look also, and smelt of lavender and pot-pourri, with which some large china bowls were filled. A pleasant room, facing the street in front, and at the back looking down on the green rolling sea and the brown jagged rocks round Headfort Bay. Ruth went to one of the windows, and stood thoughtfully looking down, and, as she did so, a young officer in undress uniform, with his sword under his arm, came out of the Fort gates, and seeing Major Audley at the door of the house, went up to speak to him, and Ruth could hear their voices from below.

This young officer was a stranger to her, but as Ruth stood there she remembered that so she would see Kenard Seaforth come out of the Fort gates ; that she must see him when he rejoined the regiment, and that thus her daily life and his would not be far apart.

She grew a little paler, and sat down as if she were tired, and a few minutes later rose, when she heard her husband's stalwart footsteps ascending the staircase.

"Where are you, Ruth ? " he called out, and she went to the drawing-room door. "I've just had a talk with Martin," he continued, "and Beaton is expected back at the end of the week, and is all right now, Martin says. Well, how do you like the house ? This seems not a bad sort of room, but I object to it being so near the Fort. However

we shall have to make the best of it, as we have got it on our hands for six months, and by that time I hope we'll be out of this blessed place for good."

"The house seems all right, I think."

"It will have to do at any rate. I wonder by-the-way, what Beaton will say when he sees Mrs. Kenyon in all her glory?" And Major Audley laughed.

"Why should he say anything?" answered Ruth coldly.

"Oh!" and Audley looked at her keenly, "I forgot you did not know."

"What is it I do not know?"

"Merely, my dear," and he shrugged his broad shoulders, "that Beaton was supposed to be, and was most awfully far gone on your charming sister."

"He is a mere boy."

"A mere boy with a deuced amount of love and folly about him, I can tell you; but we must hope the lovely Frances has sown all her wild oats by this time."

Ruth's delicate face grew crimson.

"I do not know whether you consider that the speech of a gentleman!" she retorted.

Again Audley shrugged his shoulders.

"Pray pardon me," he said, "if I have wounded your susceptibilities; but I really thought, in the case of Mrs. Kenyon——"

"Do leave her alone," interrupted Ruth indignantly, and she walked out of the room with hot anger in her heart; and thus the first words exchanged between them in their new home were full of bitterness.

And as the first, so many followed. Ruth tried to be patient with him, but Audley was angered by her coldness—coldness which he could not warm—and he was by turns bitter and sarcastic, with bursts of tenderness or rage. He had really loved her, and it infuriated him to gain no return, though she had warned him before their marriage that this must be. In headstrong haste he had rushed into a union in which there could be no happiness, and was indignant to find Ruth's words come true. He could not understand it, for he was a man who had a very good opinion of himself, and he believed that he was attractive to women, and perhaps had some reason for thinking this.

But he was too acute not to read the feelings of his young wife towards him aright, and his vanity did not

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blind him here. The cold duty which Ruth gave him, however, had not yet at least chilled his love, and the strength of this made him so resentful, that bitter words were ever on his lips, which naturally provoked retort from her.

He went to the Fort shortly after they arrived at their house, and Ruth was free to go over it by herself, and with a shudder saw from one of the back windows that they looked straight down into the bay.

That miserable night, the blinding lightning, the crashing thunder, and the streaming rain, all seemed to come back to her memory with vivid force, as she stood looking out at the very spot where the secret lay hidden which had placed her in Audley's power. The choice of the house had been an unfortunate one then, since it was haunted with such terrible recollections for Ruth.

"And he will taunt me with it," she thought, thinking of her husband. "Oh, why did father bring me here!"

But the next morning, when she went to see her father, she made no complaints. She found the Colonel looking much more amiable than usual, and she speedily learned the cause.

"I've had a letter from Kenyon," he said, "and Frances and he are coming home to-day. Here is Kenyon's letter—you see there is a message for you in it; certainly Kenyon is a pleasant fellow, which cannot be said of everyone."

Ruth understood the "everyone" to allude to her husband, but she said nothing; she proceeded to open her brother-in-law's letter, which was dated from Edinburgh, as Frances and the Colonel had been touring in the Highlands, from whence they were now returning.

"MY DEAR FORTH," Ruth read in the Colonel's fine clear handwriting. "My darling and I are both anxious to get home, so we shall be at Sudley to-morrow afternoon, I expect about six o'clock; and as you will naturally be anxious to see Frances, will you come over to dine at eight o'clock with us, and stay the night? It will give us both great pleasure if you will do this, and if we hear nothing to the contrary we shall expect you. Has Mrs. Audley returned from France yet? Frances is very anxious

to see her, and is looking forward to having her very constantly at Sudley, and I hope you also shall always feel yourself quite at home there. Frances sends all sorts of kind messages, and believe me, dear Forth, to remain,

"Yours very faithfully,

"HUGH KENYON."

"It is a nice letter," said Ruth, softly, as she finished reading it. "I hope Frances will be very happy," and she suppressed a sigh.

"If she's not, it will be her own fault, and I shall have no patience with her. Yes, Kenyon's one in a thousand, and that's the sort of letter one ought to receive from a man who has married one's daughter."

"And you'll go, of course, father?" asked Ruth, ignoring the latter part of the Colonel's speech.

"Go! of course I'll go; I've not had such a pleasant time here all by myself, I can tell you, not to be glad of a little change. And I'm pleased too that you'll have your sister so near you."

"Yes, I'm very glad."

"That husband of yours is not over gracious in his manner, eh?" now said the Colonel, turning round, and fixing his reddish-tinted eyes on his daughter's face. "He gave me a deuced deal of trouble seeking that house for him, and he's never had the grace to ask me into it; very odd behavior, I think?"

"We are scarcely settled yet, you see, and have not got all the servants we require. When we get them, you must come and dine with us."

"Oh, hang it all! D'ye suppose I want any of his dinners? What I want is, to be asked in a friendly way into my daughter's house to have a brandy-and-soda, or anything that's going. That's the sort of thing I like; and I must say I think Audley's a cool hand."

Ruth made no reply. Her sorrow was too deep and bitter to speak of to her father, and therefore she said nothing; but after a little while she went up to her old bedroom, as she wished to see if Frances had left behind her the little desk where she had locked Kenard Seaforth's portrait away upon her wedding morning.

The desk was standing undusted on the chest of drawers, and Ruth unlocked it, and looked at the face of her young lover with wistful, tender eyes.

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"I suppose I should destroy it; but what harm is there in keeping it?" she thought; and when she left her father's house she carried the desk away with her, and found her husband impatiently waiting for her at home.

Major Audley was in undress uniform, and was striding up and down the dining room, where luncheon was laid, when Ruth arrived, and he looked very much annoyed.

"Where have you been, Ruth?" he asked sharply. "I cannot have you wandering about the village alone in this way."

"I have only been to my father's," she answered.

"Couldn't you have waited until I could go with you, instead of going out exactly at luncheon time. And what's that you're carrying?"

"Only a little old desk I left behind me," said Ruth with a sudden blush, which Audley was quick to notice; and she put the desk down on a side table as she spoke.

"You need not have brought a shabby thing like that; I'll give you a new desk if you want one."

"Oh, this will do very well."

"One of the most remarkable things about you, Ruth, is that though all the other women I have ever known like gifts, you seem perfectly indifferent about them. But perhaps this elegant article," and he took up the little desk with a contemptuous gesture, "is associated with some tender recollections?"

"Frances gave it to me long ago, on my birthday," said Ruth nervously and quickly. "My father has had a letter from Colonel Kenyon this morning," she added, "and they will be at Sudley this evening, and father is going to dine there, and stay all night."

"Very pleasant for the Colonel to have such a hospitable son-in-law."

"They are old friends."

"And how is the lovely Mrs. Kenyon?"

A servant brought in a hot dish for lunch at this moment, and so the conversation ended; but Audley noticed that after the meal was over Ruth carefully carried her desk from the room, and he determined some day to examine its contents.

He took her out to drive during the afternoon, and, as they were returning from a somewhat dreary round, when then entered High-street they encountered Colonel

Forth, who was about to start for Sudley to welcome his daughter on her arrival there.

"Ah, Audley," said the Colonel, coolly enough, "been out for a drive, eh? I'm just off to Sudley, as Kenyon has invited me to go and spend the first evening with my daughter in her new home."

Audley smiled grimly, for he quite understood the Colonel's hint.

"Give my best love to Frances," said Ruth; "I shall go to see her very soon."

"You'll always be welcome, that's one thing I can promise you; Kenyon is a hospitable fellow if there ever was one."

"Well, we shall not keep you any longer from his hospitality, then," said Audley, with a smile, which looked very like a sneer. "Good-day, Colonel," and he nodded and drove on, leaving his father-in-law no better pleased with him than he was before.

But if one daughter's husband was not satisfactory in the Colonel's eyes, the other was eminently so. When he reached Sudley, the owner and his bride had not yet arrived, but were momentarily expected. And as the carriage which bore them home appeared in sight, the Colonel went into the courtyard to receive them.

"See, dearest, there is your father," said Colonel Kenyon, bending out of the window and greeting his old friend with kindly smiles. "Thank you, Forth, for being here to meet us," he continued, as he got out of the carriage and warmly shook Forth's hand; "it has made it more than ever like coming home to Frances to find you here."

"Very glad to see you both again," answered Colonel Forth, as he presented his red face to his daughter to kiss, who just touched it for a moment smilingly with her rosy lips.

"How is Ruth?" she asked.

"Oh, all right, I think; but she doesn't look so well as you do; no, confound it, she doesn't!"

Frances was in truth looking her very best. The air of the Scottish hills had brightened her always beautiful skin, and she had felt no small pride and pleasure in entering the park surrounding the stately home of which now she was the mistress.

"After all," she reflected, "I have not done badly;" and while Colonel Kenyon was speaking tender words,

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which their home-coming naturally called forth, of long years to be spent in happiness together, Frances was planning entertainments, in which the thought of her husband had no place.

But he did not know this. To all outward seeming she was loving, happy and content, and so in very truth was the generous heart of the man by her side, for he saw no fault in her; to him her beautiful form was a fitting dwelling-place for her soul.

And no shadow nor foreboding of coming ill lay athwart his threshold as he crossed it on the bright September evening that he brought home his fair wife. The sun was setting behind the dark belt of lofty trees to the west of the Park, that those who had borne his name before him had reared and planted; and some of the golden beams glinting through the foliage fell on her bright hair, lighting it with rays of glory just as they entered the house.

It seemed like a good omen of the days to come; the days when she, who walked so proudly in, was for the first time to bring dishonor under the roof-tree.

CHAPTER XXI.

CALLING ON THE BRIDE.

WHEN Frances came down to breakfast the next morning, she announced in her bright lively way that she intended driving at once into Headfort to call on Ruth.

"Shall I drive you, then?" asked Colonel Kenyon, looking at her smilingly.

"Will you?" she answered. "Of course, I should like that awfully, but I thought perhaps that you two" (and she glanced at her father) "would be going partridge shooting this morning?"

"Should you like a day's shooting, Forth?" asked Colonel Kenyon. "Because Palmer will go with you if you would, and he tells me the birds are strong and plentiful; but I must look after this young lady, I think," and again he looked at Frances.

"Well, I think I would like to have a shy at them; but can't you wait until the afternoon to go into Headfort, Frances?" said her father.

"No," she answered, in her pretty manner. "I am dying to see Ruth, and dying to show my new carriage and ponies to the envious inhabitants."

"Silly girl," said her husband, fondly.

She laughed, and when breakfast was over went into the conservatory, which was at the right side of the house, and cut some of the choicest flowers to take to Ruth.

"Tell them to get me some fruit too," she told her husband; and when the carriage came round he was waiting for her in the hall as she descended the stair-case, ready to drive her to Headfort.

"I have told them to put two brace of partridges in the carriage also for Mrs. Audley," he said, kindly; "is there anything else, dear, you should like to take to your sister?"

He was always like this—so thoughtful and considerate, and Frances ought to have felt that she was a lucky woman, and perhaps did feel so as they entered Headfort, and drove down High-street, passing the little house in the garden, where she had suffered so much. And their arrival created quite a sensation in the small place, which doubtless pleased Frances, who loved to be envied and admired, and sat proudly conscious that everyone they passed was looking at them, and commenting on her new carriage, her ponies, and her good looks.

The ponies were in truth a splendid pair, and Frances, who was a fair whip, though of late she had had nothing to drive, intended to begin again, and was delighted with these beautiful bays; and when the Colonel pulled up at No. 47, she was looking as pleased and happy as it was possible for a woman to look.

And Ruth from her window saw this, and a sweet glow stole over her fair face.

"At least she is happy," she thought softly; "it has not been all thrown away, then; her life is safe."

She ran into the hall to meet Frances, and flung her arms round her, and kissed her fondly.

"I'm so pleased to see you, dear—oh! so pleased," she murmured, with her cheek against her sister's.

"And I have brought my good man with me," said Frances gaily, for the Colonel was still outside talking to his groom, and examining the ponies; "and look what sweet flowers, and there is some game and some fruit in the carriage for you."

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"How kind you are, dear;" and the sisters went towards the street door together, and met Colonel Kenyon bringing in the partridges.

"Well, my dear," he said, shaking Ruth's hand warmly, "and how are you getting on, and how is Audley?"

"He is very well," she answered, and she cast down her eyes.

"And how do you think my young lady is looking?" went on the genial Colonel, with a tender light in his eyes as they fell on his handsome wife.

"As well as she could look," said Ruth, now affectionately regarding Frances' lovely face; "but we must not flatter her too much, Colonel, or we shall turn her head."

"You must call him 'Hugh' now, my dear," said Frances, putting her hand on her young sister's shoulder.

"Must I?"

"Yes, unless you think me too old," smiled Colonel Kenyon.

"Oh, no, no," said Ruth, quickly; "I am happy to call you Hugh—oh, so happy!" And she turned her head away to hide the moisture which had stolen to her eyes.

"And now let us go over your castle," suggested Frances, brightly; "it's a jolly house, isn't it, Hugh?" And she looked round and then walked into the dining room, the door of which was open, and went to one of the windows.

"Why, it's close to the Fort?" she said. "How convenient for Audley!"

"He thinks it too near."

"Perhaps"—began Frances, and then she stopped. "Do you know, Ruth, you are going back to dinner, and to stay all night with us?" she added a moment later. "Isn't she, Hugh?"

"You know I hope she will; but where is Audley?"

"At the Fort," answered Ruth; and again the Colonel noticed that the young wife's eyes fell at the mention of her husband's name.

"I tell you what, my dear," went on Colonel Kenyon, "suppose you and Audley dine with us to-night and stay over to-morrow, and then Audley will get a day's shooting to-morrow, and you and Frances a nice gossip all to yourselves, when we men are pottering away at the partridges? Should you like that?"

"Very, very much, if Major Audley——" and Ruth hesitated and slightly blushed.

"Of course Audley will like it!" cried Frances. "The partridges will fetch him; you may trust a man in one thing, my dear, which is never to miss a day's shooting when he can get it."

"Come, don't be so hard on us poor men," said Kenyon, with a ready laugh; "I'll go over to the Fort now, and hunt up Audley and settle with him about coming; I dare say you two have lots to say to each other," and he nodded kindly and went away.

The sisters looked at each other after he was gone, and Frances went up to Ruth and took her hand.

"Well," she said, "and how do you get on with him?"

"As well as I expected," answered Ruth gravely; "but do not let us talk about it; tell me about yourself—you are very happy?"

Frances gave one of her pretty shrugs.

"I have everything a reasonable woman could require," she said brightly; "plenty of money, a good home, yes everything—only you know, my dear!" And again she gave a little shrug.

"Oh! Frances, you have everything indeed!" said Ruth, earnestly. "Colonel Kenyon is the best and kindest of men."

"So he is; he lets me have all my own way, and he gives me whatever I ask. Still——"

"He is so unselfish, so thoughtful; I am so glad, dear, you have been so lucky, so happy."

"Happiness, my dear," said Frances, throwing back her head, "is a possession we must learn to live without in this tiresome world. It means too much—more than I have—though I think you believe that I have everything."

"I do, indeed."

"All right then, go on believing it; I have everything, as I said before, that a reasonable woman could want; unfortunately, I suppose, I am an unreasonable one, and I cannot help myself."

She went to one of the windows of the room as she spoke, and stood looking out for a moment or two in silence, and then turned quickly round.

"By-the-bye," she said, "have you heard anything about poor Beaton since you have got home?"

"Major Audley told me he was expected back at the end of this week, and that he is all right now."

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"Ah—how funny it is to hear you call your husband Major Audley! Do you always do so?"

"No," and Ruth blushed; "he told me to call him Richard; but somehow I always speak of him to other people as Major Audley."

"It sounds very quaint. And so Beaton is coming back; I shall be glad to see him again."

Ruth said nothing; she was remembering her husband's comments on the subject.

"Here is Hugh, and Audley himself!" now cried Frances, who had turned again to the window. "Really Audley is a fine-looking man—almost handsome."

A moment or two later she was shaking hands with him, and smiling up in his face.

"I have just been admiring you out of the window," she said gaily; "haven't I, Ruth?"

"So you said," answered Ruth.

"Ruth takes very good care never to admire me, at all events," remarked Audley as if half in jest.

"She is afraid of making you vain," said Frances; "but you are going to be very good, are you not, Major Audley, to-day?"

"To be good is not my *rôle*, I fear."

"There are exceptions to every rule, you know, and however bad you are in general, you are going to be good to-day. You are coming to dine at Sudley, and stay over to-morrow, and shoot no end of partridges."

"Who could refuse such an invitation from such charming lips? I shall be delighted."

"There, Ruth, isn't he good now? And what news is there at the Fort? Any of the old men we used to know back again?"

"Beaton is back," said Audley, fixing his bold, smiling eyes on her face.

"That is the good-looking young fellow who had the accident? Oh, I remember him quite well. So he is back?"

"Yes, he came last night; his beauty isn't improved by being ploughed by a bullet though, and he's lost half an ear."

"Oh, poor fellow!"

"I've just seen him, Frances," now said Colonel Kenyon, who had been standing by, an amused listener to the

conversation between his wife and Audley. "He seems a very gentlemanly young fellow. I asked him to come over and see us some day."

"And is he coming?" asked Frances, with interest.

"He said he was scarcely strong enough yet to go about, but I daresay he'll cast up."

"No doubt he will," said Audley, and again he looked smilingly at Frances.

"He is a nice boy. I am glad he has got well, even if his good looks are gone; and now, Hugh," continued Frances, turning to her husband, "don't you think we should consider the ponies? Have you looked at them, Major Audley? They are such a lovely pair, and he bought them for me!" And she smiled and nodded at Colonel Kenyon.

"He is a happy man to have the privilege of buying for you."

"What a pretty speech! Hugh, do you hear? My brother-in-law is saying such nice things, you ought to be jealous. Well, come and look at the ponies, for I am most awfully proud of them."

They went out to admire the ponies, and Frances was charming and gay, but Ruth very quiet.

"My dear," said Colonel Kenyon, as they drove from 47 High street, "I'm afraid the little sister does not look over bright."

"Do you think not?" answered Frances. "Well, you know I always thought Major Audley looked like a selfish man."

"I cannot understand why she married him."

"One never can account for these things; she may see something in him that we don't!"

"That is quite true; but I hope he will be good to her, and at all events, dear, she has you to fall back upon."

"Yes, and you will be always kind to her, I know."

And while Frances and her husband were speaking thus, Ruth and Audley were talking of them.

"Certainly your sister looks remarkably well," Audley said, as together they re-entered their house, after admiring the ponies, and when the owners of the ponies had driven away.

"Yes, I never saw her look better," answered Ruth.

"She really is a wonderful woman," continued Audley,

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CHAPTER XXII.

THE RETURN VISIT.

THOUGH it pleased Audley to scoff and jest at Frances' expense when she was not by, in her own house his manner was very different. He drove Ruth over to Sudley in time for dinner, as he had promised, the same day Colonel Kenyon and his wife had called upon them at Headfort, and thus Colonel Forth and his two daughters were again under the same roof.

They all three thought this, perhaps, as they sat round Colonel Kenyon's hospitable board, Frances doing the honors of the table with a grace and sprightliness which delighted the kindly host, whose eyes often rested on her lovely face with tender pride.

For Frances was doing her best to be charming, as she meant to disarm the smiling, cynical man who knew her secret, and who looked at her sometimes in a way that reminded her of this fact, though his words were ever smooth. And so wonderful is the power of flattery on the human heart, that though Audley knew very well that Mrs. Kenyon *was* flattering him, and why she was doing it, yet it subtly influenced him in her favor, and he began to wonder less at what he had hitherto thought and spoken of as "an infatuation on the part of the young fool" who had so nearly died for her sake.

"I want you to make me a promise, Major Audley," said Frances, smiling at him ; Frances, dressed to perfection, looking in his face with her shining eyes, and bending her shapely head close to his.

"Don't ask me anything I cannot do, then, for it would overwhelm me to refuse," he answered, amused.

"It is that you will try to feel really like a brother to me—*really*, you know—and that you will come here, and bring Ruth here just as if it were your sister's house, which of course it is."

"With the cold, hard words 'in-law,' unfortunately added."

"We shall drop the 'in-law.' Please call me Frances, and as you are one of the family now, I wish you to feel quite at home here."

"You are more than good. I do not think I dare presume to call you Frances, though."

"But why?"

"I have a reasonable desire to prolong my days, and I fear Colonel Kenyon would shoot me."

"You vain man! Do you think yourself so fascinating that everyone must needs be jealous of you?"

"I think it but a natural feeling in the husband of so beautiful a woman."

"Are these the pretty things you used to whisper so softly in Lady Hastings' ears?"

"You think they are part of my stock-in-trade, then? By-the-bye, I must look Lady Hastings up. She'll be calling on you, of course?"

"I suppose so," said Frances, with a little shrug; "and I shall be an amiable sister, and ask you to meet her, and flirt with stout little Sir James!"

"That would be cruel. You might disturb his serenity, and he is really a worthy little man; a most obliging husband."

"What a sarcastic creature you are! I shall begin to be afraid of you."

"You need not be," and Audley looked straight in her face with an expression which caused Frances to drop her bright eyes, for she understood the covert meaning that he meant to convey to her.

Yet she said nothing of this to Ruth when they returned to the drawing-room together. It was a clear, fine night, and Frances opened one of the windows, and went out on the terrace in front of the house, and Ruth put her arm through her sister's and they walked up and down discussing many things—the capabilities of their houses, their servants, their horses, but not speaking of their husbands, nor of the secrets of their hearts.

And presently the three men joined them, and stood smoking and chatting, and a looker-on would have said a happy family group was presented to his gaze. Yet there was but one amongst these five content, and this was the

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genial, generous-minded host. Colonel Forth's discontent was chronic, and therefore unreasonable under the circumstances ; but the other three—Audley, Frances, and Ruth—were each thinking of his or her grievance, as they stood there in the still night. But "the heart knoweth its own bitterness," and we laugh and smile over dead hopes and vanished joys.

Soon after breakfast next morning, the men went out with their guns, and Frances retired with her maid to consider enchanting tea-gowns, gorgeous dinner-gowns, and other feminine attractions and vanities. It was a bright day, and the sun tempted Ruth out into the grounds, and she crossed the well-kept lawn, and went on with bent head, thinking of the past. And it was but natural that the never-to-be-forgotten hours that she had spent here on the afternoon of Colonel Kenyon's garden party, when Kenard Seaforth had first spoken of his love, should now recur to her mind with vivid distinctness. Brief time had passed since then, yet it seemed to Ruth as though years of anguish had dragged their slow course over her breast since she had met Audley by the field of uncut corn, and he had told her that all her fond hopes must end.

They had ended, and she was Audley's wife, and all that had made her life worth living for had passed away. It was unutterably weary to her ; a life of constant struggle and revolt against the fate he had forced her to accept, the bitterness of which was not lessened by each passing day.

And Audley saw this, and it chafed him so keenly that it made his tongue bitter and his ways hard, even tyrannical. He should have got on better with Frances, who would have understood how to humor him, and have flattered him with pleasant words, which, though he might not have trusted them, would still have been pleasing to his ears.

But Ruth made no pretense of affection she did not feel. She gave him cold duty, nothing more, and avoided quarrelling with him if she could, though many a time he stung her to retort. No happiness had come of this marriage, and she had warned him that none could come. His heart was bitter with disappointment, hers overshadowed by a great regret.

And thinking of these things, she went on to the green and shadowy wood, beneath whose shade Kenard's first kiss had pressed her lips. She reached the spot where they had sat together, dreaming as pure and sweet a dream of love as ever stirred the hearts of youth and maiden. We know how these sweet hopes ended, for her in cruel shame and pain; for him in bitter anger and disappointment.

"And we might have been so happy," she sighed, "we were so happy—it is too sad, too sad."

She leaned her head against the trunk of a tree as she thought this; a tree on which she remembered he had rested his hand, and something like a prayer—a prayer for him—faltering on her lips.

"But Frances is happy; Frances is safe," she reflected a few minutes later; "it is useless to regret," and she laid her face against the tree, kissed it, and turned away; and as she re-entered the grounds she met Frances, who was looking for her.

"My dear, wherever have you been?" said Frances. "I have ordered the ponies, and want you to go with me into Headfort, for some things that Jones requires."

"Without Colonel Kenyon?" asked Ruth.

"Do we need Colonel Kenyon to help us to choose some reels of colored thread?" answered Frances, with a light laugh. "My dear, do not be stupid."

"I only thought that perhaps he might like to go with you after lunch."

"But then you see I like to go without him before lunch, and so make Jones and her reels the excuse. In fact, I want a little change, and it will be jolly you and me going together. I wonder if we shall meet any of the men from the Fort?"

"But are you not afraid to drive the ponies?" said Ruth, after a moment's silence.

"Not a bit; the groom will be with us. What harm can come to us?"

Ruth made no further objections, and presently the two sisters went into the courtyard, where they found the carriage and the ponies waiting for them. Frances was rather proud of her driving, though she had had very little practice of late; and they speedily found themselves passing swiftly along the roadways, and before long they

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reached Headfort, Frances driving rapidly down High-street, and pulling up at the small linen draper's shop that was situated in its midst.

As she gave the reins to the groom, both she and Ruth recognised at the same moment a tall, slender figure in undress uniform, who was advancing towards them. It was young Beaton ; but when he saw Frances, his pale, handsome face, with the deep scar across his cheek, suddenly flushed, and then grew white. He stopped, hesitated, and was about to turn back, so as to avoid meeting her, when Frances jumped lightly from the carriage, and went forward towards him with outstretched hand.

"How are you? I am so glad we have met you," she said ; "Major Audley told us you were back."

But Beaton could find no words to answer her. He was painfully agitated, and the rush of feelings, which swept like a whirlwind through his heart, made him dumb. But he took her hand, and looked at the beautiful face which had already cost him so dear, and Frances saw there was no change in his dark grey eyes.

"You know Ruth—Mrs. Audley," she went on a little nervously, turning back towards the carriage, in which Ruth was still seated. "We have come on a shopping expedition, and I assure you it is a wonder our necks are not broken, for I have never driven these ponies before."

Beaton went up to Ruth, and tried to say a few common-place words, and Ruth felt sorry for him, and spoke to him gently and kindly.

"Ruth, my dear, do go like a good creature, and get me some colored threads," now said Frances ; "I hate so going into these little poky shops, and Mr. Beaton will stay and chat with me until you come out." And she looked at him and smiled.

"What colors do you want?" asked Ruth a little gravely.

"Oh, any color—red, blue, green—whatever they have."

"Very well," said Ruth, and she got out of the carriage, and went into the shop, and, as she did so, again Frances looked at Beaton.

"Do you know I hoped we should meet you to-day?" she said ; "I wished so much to see you. You must come to see us at Sudley."

"You are very good—but——"

"I shall listen to no 'buts,'" smiled Frances, as Beaton paused, his eyes still resting on her face. "Colonel Kenyon told me he had asked you, and now I ask you, so you must come."

"You are very kind."

"Kind to ourselves, you mean. I assure you I find it horribly dull there."

A thrill of joy passed through the young man's fast-beating heart.

"And yet," he said, hesitating and casting down his eyes, "you have everything there that women care for?"

"That women are *said* to care for, Mr. Beaton! None of us have what we really care for, I think; we are creatures of circumstances, and can't help ourselves."

At this moment Ruth came out of the shop, followed by an obsequious shopman carrying a small parcel.

"I have got all the colors they have," she said, addressing Frances; "I suppose you want nothing else?"

"Not to-day, I think," answered Frances with a shrug and a smile. "Ruth, let us walk down to your place, and the carriage can follow us; and perhaps you will extend your hospitality so far as to give me a glass of wine, for those ponies have nearly dislocated my wrists."

"Of course," said Ruth, and her delicate face flushed.

"You come with us and amuse us," continued Frances, now looking at Beaton with her bright eyes; and he turned and walked down the street with them, Frances doing her best the while to resume her old empire over him.

And when they arrived at Major Audley's house she insisted that he should go in with them.

"Come," she said, and he followed her up to the drawing-room; Ruth staying behind in the hall for a few moments to order some refreshments.

"I want to speak to you," began Frances, when she and Beaton had reached the drawing-room, and as she spoke she closed the door. "I want to tell you I got your letter, you know—the letter Seaforth enclosed when you were ill—but I could not answer it. I may as well say I dare not. But"—and she held out her hand—"I wish you to understand now how deeply I felt—how deeply I regret—if I had made you unhappy."

"It is useless to speak of it," said Beaton, who was visibly agitated.

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"Yes, yes, it is. I don't want you to think me quite heartless, or that I caused you pain without suffering any. I could not help myself, and that is the truth—so forgive me, Arthur."

She pulled off her driving glove as she spoke, and once more held out her slim white hand, which he clasped tightly, though he uttered no word.

"There! we are friends again," said Frances, a moment or two later, drawing away her hand; "and now let us remain friends. We must not talk any nonsense, you know; but, all the same, we shall understand." And she lifted her eyes to his face and smiled, and poor Arthur Beaton felt his life no longer wearisome nor dull.

He grew excited, almost happy, and when the wine was brought in which Ruth had ordered, he became animated and bright, for he was clever, and all his feelings were strong and deep. He was handsome, too, and the scar across his cheek made him more attractive still to Frances' shining eyes. She liked him; liked his youth, his good looks, and his passionate love, which he had flung so recklessly at her feet.

"Will you dine with us to-morrow?" she said, before they parted, and Beaton now eagerly accepted the invitation, and was ready to go anywhere that he could see her.

He went down to the carriage with them, and stood leaning one hand on it, as Frances lingered smiling and talking after they had taken their seats,

"To-morrow, then," she said at length, and drove away; Beaton standing watching her until she disappeared, with a look on his face which very plainly told the feelings of his heart.

"How good-looking he is!" Frances was saying at this moment, and she gave a little sigh.

"He is a nice boy," said Ruth; "a romantic boy."

"He is not such a boy, my dear; and after all what is like youth? It's horrid to think that his generous passionate heart will turn cold too—like the rest."

"Everyone does not turn cold and hard; look at Hugh."

"Really, Ruth, it is an immense pity, d'ye know, that my venerable Hugh did not bestow his youthful affections on you, instead of my unworthy self. I believe you are in love with him."

"Not quite," answered Ruth, pleasantly; "but I admire him; he is a noble-hearted gentleman. I have no words of higher praise."

"He is a kind, middle-aged man, with a pretty young wife, of whom he is proud—and, well, I think fond. But there is nothing out of the common in that, and I really cannot look upon him as a hero."

"Come, you have been a lucky girl."

"Very!" said Frances with a little scoffing laugh, and then she changed the conversation; and when they reached Sudley they found Colonel Kenyon standing looking out anxiously for them in the courtyard.

"My dear Frances," he said, "why did you not tell me you wished to go out for a drive? You know I should have been delighted to take you?"

"I know you are awfully good," she answered, smilingly, as he helped her out of the carriage, "and I believe would absolutely have given up your morning's shooting to my whim, but you see I was not selfish enough to ask you."

"But, my dear, I don't like you driving these ponies; you must promise not to do it again, Frances; I will go with you wherever you like, but I have been quite anxious about you."

"Silly young man! Well, I hope lunch is ready, for we are starving."

"Your father and Audley declare they are starving, too. And how did Frances drive, my dear?" he added, turning to Ruth, and looking at her kindly, for his eyes always softened when they rested on her sad young face.

"Oh, she drove beautifully, and the ponies went so well," smiled Ruth.

"And where did you go?"

"We went to Headfort; Frances' maid wanted some silks and threads."

"But these might have been very easily got, surely, without your going for them? You must not let Frances be so reckless about driving, Ruth, until she is more accustomed to it; she is so plucky, you know, she is afraid of nothing, so we both must look after her."

"Very well," said Ruth, and she followed her brother-in-law into the dining-room, where Frances had already gone. Colonel Forth and Audley were also already there, and having each had a brandy and soda, were slightly

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impatient to begin lunch, the long morning's work having given them an appetite.

"So you've been out driving, Mrs. Kenyon?" said Audley, as Frances entered the room, looking flushed and handsome.

"Yes, I wished to try the ponies, and so we drove into Headfort, as my maid wanted something matched."

"Odd place to match anything, eh?"

"Oh, Robertson's is not such a bad place for little things as you would think. Here comes Ruth; tell this husband of yours, my dear, what a splendid whip I have grown. But really, didn't I drive well, Ruth?"

"Yes, but Colonel Kenyon does not seem to think it was very fine," answered Ruth.

"It really is not, Frances; those ponies are very spirited, and they are too much for a lady," said Colonel Kenyon as he sat down to talk.

"I must have a steady pair, then, as I mean to drive every day," answered Frances. "Who do you think we met, Hugh?" she continued, beginning her luncheon; "that young Beaton, you know, who shot himself, and we had a chat, and he told me you had asked him here, so I invited him to dinner to-morrow."

"Very well, dear," said Colonel Kenyon placidly.

"And how do you think he looked?" asked Audley, fixing his eyes smilingly on Frances' face.

"Very well, I thought; he is rather good-looking, isn't he?" she answered.

"He is remarkably good-looking," said Audley; "and until" (and he paused a moment, still looking smilingly at her) "he made such a fool of himself with his revolver he was a very handsome lad."

"He had a close shave for his life, hadn't he?" said Kenyon.

"About as near a thing as could be; I rather like Beaton, he's such a plucky boy," answered Audley.

"A young fool not to see his revolver was loaded," growled Colonel Forth, who had been listening to the conversation, and did not like to hear of the invitation which Frances had given to Beaton to dine at Sudley.

And when luncheon was over, Audley followed Ruth upstairs, where she had gone to take off her hat, and attacked her on the same subject.

"So your sister has been trying to turn that poor lad's head again, I suppose?" he said, roughly enough.

"I really do not know what you mean," answered Ruth, coldly.

"Well, I tell you what I mean; I'm not going to let you drive into Headfort and sit flirting in High-street with any man you can pick up. If Mrs. Kenyon chooses to go, and Kenyon is fool enough to let her, well and good; let her go, but you shan't."

"What! Not drive with my own sister?" said Ruth, indignantly.

"Your sister being such a very discreet chaperone," sneered Audley.

"Yet you make up to her, and accept her hospitality," retorted Ruth, flushing scarlet.

"I am civil to her, as I do not wish all her little foibles to be known to the world as well as you and I know them. But you are my wife, and I'm not going to have you talked of with any of the men at the Fort, I can tell you. Kenyon is a doting fool, but I'm not."

"No one can accuse you of being doting, at any rate," answered Ruth, with curling lip.

"I am as you have made me," he answered harshly, and he left the room, and Ruth looked after him with a face full of scorn.

"He is too low," she thought; "any woman would hate him," and her heart felt very bitter.

CHAPTER XXIII.

DINING ALONE.

THE consequence of this squabble was that Audley insisted on returning to Headfort the same afternoon. He went back to the dining-room, where Frances and her husband and father were still loitering, and announced that to his great regret he found he must be in Headfort early to-morrow morning, as there were some military duties he was compelled to see after.

"Well, leave Ruth here then, and come back to-morrow afternoon?" at once suggested Frances.

But Audley refused.

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"You are very good," he said, "but Ruth will go back with me in an hour," and he looked at his watch.

"You must bring her here to-morrow then. Just think, I asked young Beaton on purpose, because you and Ruth were with us ; so, indeed you must be here !"

"I am perfectly certain that Beaton will be quite content with *your* society."

"Oh, now don't be disagreeable, Major Audley, when I thought you were going to be so nice? What has happened? Have you and Ruth had a lovers' quarrel?"

Audley gave a short, harsh laugh.

"That would be impossible," he said.

"Then why are you going to take her away? *Do* let her stay, at any rate over to-morrow."

But Audley was firm, or rather obstinate. This man, so cold and cynical as a rule, had been stung by Ruth's taunt that he abused her sister, and yet was ready to partake of her hospitality, as no one else's words could sting him. He felt indeed for Ruth what he had never felt for any woman before, though he sometimes asked himself whether it was love or hate he gave to the pale, handsome girl whose heart was as stone to him.

He lit a cigar and went out on the terrace, and tried not to feel worried, for he knew very well he had only himself to blame for the discomforts of his life. As he walked up and down, he remembered Ruth's vain and passionate appeals to him before their marriage, as we remember things we would often fain forget. The memory of these pricked him afresh now when he began to realise their bitter truth. She had told him no happiness could come to them, and he knew well that it was so. And as he walked up and down he began telling himself there must be some cause for her conduct ; that it was against the nature of things, this cold indifference, or, rather, dislike. Could she still care for Kenard Seaforth? And as this thought flashed through his brain he muttered an oath, and impatiently stamped his foot on the gravelled path.

He was a vain man, though he tried to hide this, for he was too cynical not to know that vanity exposed other people to ridicule in his eyes, and that he, therefore, in turn, would seem ridiculous if he showed this weakness. But, all the same, he had a very good opinion of himself, and had believed himself attractive, almost irresistible, to women.

Yet here was a woman—his wife—who avoided his presence whenever she could, and scarcely gave him a civil, certainly never a kind, word. It infuriated him to think of it, wounding his vanity and his love alike. But she should not taunt him any more with hanging on Mrs. Kenyon, he mentally resolved; and though he knew Ruth's attachment to her sister was one of the strongest feelings of her heart, he determined in his hard way to punish her for her words by making her leave Sudley immediately.

Presently he flung away his cigar, and once more went up to Ruth's bedroom. He found her sitting idly by the window, with a far-away look in her grey and pensive eyes, and as he entered he saw her brow contract.

"Will you get ready?" he said, in a cool, quiet tone. "I've ordered the trap to be round in half-an-hour, as I want to be back in Headfort by four o'clock."

"I did not even know you were going to-day," answered Ruth, surprised.

"You know now, then. I shall not intrude any longer on Mrs. Kenyon's hospitality."

"What is the matter? Has she offended you?"

"No; but you have. But it's no matter."

"I meant nothing, except I wish you would not abuse Frances. It can do no good."

"Possibly not; but I am not going to be dictated to by you on what I choose to say or leave unsaid. Therefore, if you will be good enough to get ready, I want to be off."

"Very well," said Ruth, quietly; "I shall go down and tell Frances we are going."

"I've already told her, so you can spare yourself the trouble."

"Still, I think I had better go."

"Please yourself," answered Audley, and he strode out of the room again with his heavy step, feeling half ashamed of himself for being so rude, and yet so angry that he could not control his temper.

Meanwhile, downstairs Frances was abusing him to her heart's content.

"Is it not odious of him?" she said, looking at her husband. "Why can't he let Ruth stay and come back for her, if he must go?"

"I fancy something has put him out," answered Colonel Kenyon.

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"He's a beastly temper," growled Forth, who had never cared much for Audley.

"He's most selfish, and it's so nice to have Ruth here—don't you think so, Hugh?" And Frances went up and laid her hand on her husband's shoulder, who bent down and kissed it.

"Indeed I do, dearest; she's a sweet girl, and if it makes you happy to have her, you know it makes me."

"Never could understand what she married him for," said Colonel Forth; "doesn't seem much love lost between them, in my opinion."

"Oh, I think he is fond of her," answered Colonel Kenyon; "but I think perhaps he does not quite understand her nature—the nature of a shy young girl."

"I shall go up and see if he has really told her she must go," said Frances, now turning to leave the room.

"Don't say anything against him to her, dear," said Kenyon, gently detaining Frances' hand, "we must all try to make the best of him, you know, to her."

"Very well."

But Frances did not exactly obey her husband in this matter. She went up to Ruth's room, and found her with her hat on, and at once commenced to speak her mind pretty freely about Audley.

"So he is going to take you away at a moment's notice," she said, indignantly. "Whatever is he doing it for, Ruth?"

"He has got some duty in the morning," was the quiet answer.

"But why can't he leave you and come back again? I am perfectly disgusted with him,"

"It is no use saying anything, Frances; it is best to say nothing," said Ruth, almost warningly.

Frances understood her meaning, and began to walk up and down the room with hasty steps. She, too, saw it was wise not to quarrel with Audley, though she did not guess that Ruth's disagreement with him had been about herself. Ruth was in truth too generous-hearted to hint this; to tell Frances how Audley was for ever twitting her with Frances' shortcomings.

"Hugh said we must make the best of him," she presently remarked, "and I suppose we must. But I cannot tell what has come over him. He was quite pleasant at

dinner yesterday, and I flattered him enough, I am sure."

"It will all come right, I daresay; perhaps you'll be driving into Headfort to-morrow, and then I shall see you."

"I shall make a point of driving into Headfort to-morrow; well, my dear, I am awfully sorry you are going, but you must come again very, very soon."

And Frances took Ruth's advice, and parted with Audley in a friendly fashion, though she felt very angry with him still. Audley, too, was perfectly polite and even agreeable, and thanked Colonel Kenyon and Frances for their hospitality in pleasant terms.

"Always glad to see you, you know," said Kenyon as they shook hands; and a moment or two later Audley drove out of the courtyard at Sudley, and then his expression changed. And the two—Audley and Ruth—said very little to each other on that homeward drive. But what they did say was cold and civil; remarks on passing objects, nothing more. And when they reached Headfort about five o'clock, Audley went over almost at once to the Fort, and Ruth had two bridal visitors. One of these was Miss Hilliard, the banker's daughter, and the other the Vicar's wife, who brought an apology from her stout little spouse, who was laid up with a cold.

Miss Hilliard was a pretty girl, and wished now to be on very good terms with the handsome sisters, whom the world around them considered had married so well. She liked soldiers also, and knew she would very likely meet the unmarried officers at Major Audley's house. Therefore, she was even more than friendly to Ruth, whom a few months ago she had almost ignored. Frances would have scoffed at this, and maybe said a smiling word or two to remind Miss Hilliard of this fact. But Ruth's heart was too sad not to be indifferent to little things. She knew quite well that Miss Hilliard's manner was changed to her, and why it was changed; but what did it matter? She therefore talked to her visitor in the same strain in which her visitor talked to her.

"You know, of course, Mr. Seaforth is back?" presently said Miss Hilliard; and as Ruth, heard the familiar name, an almost overwhelming emotion swept through her heart.

She tried not to show this; perhaps Miss Hilliard scarcely noticed that her face grew white and clammy,

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that her hands twitched, and for a moment no words came from her pale lips.

"Jack saw him in the billiard-room last night," continued Miss Hilliard (Jack was Miss Hilliard's young brother), "and he says he's so awfully changed ; not half so good-looking as he was."

"When—did he come back ?" faltered Ruth.

"Only last night ; just before Jack saw him. But didn't you know ? I thought Major Audley would have told you, as he would know, of course ; but then you've been at Sudley."

"Yes," said Ruth, in a low tone ; and she understood now what had upset Audley, and made him angry about Frances and herself driving alone into Headfort. He had known that Seaforth was about to return, and he did not choose that they should meet.

And presently, after her visitors had left her, Audley returned to the house, and there was a look of unmistakable anger and annoyance on his face. Yet he never named Seaforth's name the whole evening. The husband and wife dined together, and it was not a homely meal. Audley felt it would have been better at Sudley, and knew he had gained nothing by taking his young wife so hastily, almost uncourteously, from her sister's house. He sat staring at her gloomily, but her eyes never met his. She was looking prettier than usual, he thought jealously ; could that gossiping girl have told her that her old lover had returned ? Audley felt enraged with himself for feeling jealous, and yet he could not help it. And there had been a coldness, a haughtiness, in Seaforth's manner to him, which told him that the young man yet deeply resented his marriage. Seaforth, perhaps, had not meant to show this, but he was a poor actor, and men as a rule do not disguise their feelings as well as women. For a woman will laugh and jest if it be well and wise to laugh and jest, when her heart is very sore.

After dinner was over, Audley sat smoking and reading (or pretending to read the newspapers). Ruth sat pretending to read a novel. These two had nothing in common to bind them closer, not one idea nor thought. Audley's hard sarcastic mind, which believed, or affected to believe, in few things pure or good, was opposed to the tender, sensitive nature of his young wife, whose warm

emotions and strong affections had been so cruelly crushed by his own conduct. And she never could forget this ; if she had respected him, her womanliness was very great, and in time some tender chord in her heart might have been touched by her husband. But she could not respect him ; she could not forget the vain cries for mercy that she had poured out to him to escape from a fate that he knew was revolting to her. She had told him that she loved Kenard Seaforth, and he, knowing this, had yet forced her into a marriage by a threat so unmanly, so contemptible, that there was always scorn in Ruth's heart when she remembered it.

And so these two, sitting there together, almost bride and bridegroom still, were each thinking of the other strange unloving thoughts. Audley, smarting from her coldness, was telling himself he had been a fool to marry her ; that he was a fool to be jealous of her, and that he wished he had never seen her face, the face which had disturbed the easy selfishness of his former life.

And what was Ruth thinking ? Hard, hard thoughts of the man opposite to her ; but for him she might now have been a happy blushing girl, telling herself, "To-morrow I shall see him—see my Kenard—;" and *now* what could that to-morrow bring her ? A chance meeting perhaps, a cold bow and averted eyes.

She sighed restlessly, and Audley heard that sigh, and flung his newspaper impatiently on the floor.

"I have often heard," he said, "that nothing is so dull as to dine alone with your wife, and, by Jove, it is certainly true."

Ruth did not speak, she lifted her eyes and looked at him, and that was all.

"I suppose you mean that for a glance of mute reproach, to remind me gently that I need not have been sitting here alone with you unless I had chosen ? My dear, I wish you would say what you intend to insinuate. I would rather a woman threw a book at my head than sit silent and sulky, as you do."

"I have nothing to say."

"Nor I," answered Audley, with an impatient shrug ; "well, *dearest*, as our good brother-in-law Kenyon is apt to express himself, when addressing the virtuous wife of his bosom, I shall relieve you of the monotony of my

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company for a short while at least, and go over to the Fort for an hour or so. Good-bye for the present," and he nodded his head and went away.

CHAPTER XXIV.

LADY HASTINGS.

THE next day Ruth once more saw Kenard Seaforth's face, and a strange feeling, a feeling that he was not the same Kenard Seaforth, swelled in her heart.

She had watched, waited and hoped to see him ; for sitting in her own dining-room she could see everyone who left the gates of the Fort, if she chose to look for them. Audley had gone out on duty early, as usual, and Ruth had been alone all the morning ; and all the morning had been thinking of Kenard. To be so near him and yet parted from him completely, so completely that she knew if they met he probably would not speak to her, not touch her hand, nor look one moment in her face.

And the bitter thought that he must despise her, that knowing she loved him, she had yet apparently of her own will married another and a richer man ! To be misunderstood is very hard, but to be misunderstood as cruelly as this seemed terrible to Ruth. For she knew that no idea of the truth could ever have crossed Kenard's mind. To him she must seem false and fickle, and all her life she must seem so. Perhaps after she was dead—and the poor girl sighed—for it was cold, sad comfort at best, to wait until the dark portals of the grave had closed over her warm and throbbing breast.

Then she remembered how she had dreamt of him the night before her marriage, and how she had told him in her dream that it would make no change in her heart to him, "*none, none.*" It had made no change ; she loved him now, she told herself, as she had loved him then, but outwardly it would make every change.

"I expect he won't even speak to me," she thought again and again sadly enough ; "but I shall see him at least ; I shall watch and wait until I see him to-day."

And she did. Major Audley generally came into lunch

about half-past one o'clock, and just a little before that hour she saw, while standing rather back in the room, Kenard Seaforth and young Beaton, both in uniform, pass through the gates of the Fort, and walk down to the village on the opposite side of the street. And she saw Beaton apparently point their house out to Seaforth, and he gave a little *laugh*, looked back at the house for a moment, and then walked on.

And a feeling came over her of faintness, a feeling vague and undefined of disappointment and pain. He had laughed, and all her bitter anguish had counted as nothing to him! She forgot for the moment what she had been telling herself the whole morning; that he must despise her, and think her unworthy of a regretful thought. But to *see this*, to feel that it cost him nothing to know she was living here as Audley's wife, that he could jest about it perhaps, seemed to her at this moment an unexpected blow.

She crept up to her bedroom, feeling physically weak and overcome. From these upper windows she could see right along the village street, and she saw Seaforth and Beaton go on to the Post Office, apparently to post letters, and then turn back. They thus again passed the house, and she distinctly saw Seaforth's face. And it seemed changed to her; he seemed changed altogether somehow—not like *her* Kenard—an older, harder looking man!

Presently she heard her husband come in, and she went downstairs, and he looked at her sharply as she entered the dining-room.

"Are you not well?" he asked. "You are pale as death. Whatever is the matter?"

"I have a headache; it is nothing," answered Ruth; and she sat down to the table and tried to eat, but the food seemed to choke her.

"By-the-bye," Audley said presently, "I had a note from Lady Hastings this morning; it had gone to the Fort, as she did not know our address here, but she and Sir James are coming to call this afternoon."

"I hope you will be in, then," said Ruth, "as I do not know her?"

"I suppose she expects I shall be in, or she would not have written," answered Audley, with rather a conscious, self-satisfied smile. "Well, she's a nice little woman, and it will be pleasant for you to know her."

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"I remember seeing her at Sudley."

"Oh, I used often to go to Amherst in my bachelor days," said Audley, carelessly. She's pretty, and, what is more, knows how to make herself agreeable, which every woman should do."

"And what is he like?"

"Oh, he's not much," answered Audley with a shrug, and then he got up and went to the window, and stood looking out into the street.

"Seaforth is back," he said a moment later, without turning round.

Ruth did not speak; she felt that she could not.

"He and Beaton are going to dine at Amherst to-morrow, I believe," continued Audley; "at least, I heard them say something about it."

"How far is it from here?" asked Ruth, and something in the tone of her voice made Audley look around.

"Five miles or so," he replied, with his eyes fixed on her face; he was wondering how she would meet Seaforth; thinking, angrily, that she must meet him.

But he said nothing; he began to smoke, and Ruth went upstairs to arrange some fresh flowers in the drawing-room, in expectation of Lady Hastings' visit. And whilst she was doing this, Frances and Colonel Kenyon arrived.

Frances at once ran upstairs to Ruth, and kissed her on both cheeks.

"My dear, how are you?" she said. "Is he in a better temper to-day?" And she nodded to denote Audley.

"Yes, I think he is," said Ruth, smiling.

"Do you know the funniest thing has happened; who do you think we have just met?"

"Who?"

"Seaforth, no less. As Hugh drove down the village, we met Beaton and Seaforth, and Hugh pulled up to tell Beaton that we should expect him to dinner this evening—and then he asked Seaforth!"

"And—is he coming?"

"He hesitated a moment, and then said he would."

"I knew he was here."

"It's very funny, isn't it? If Audley will let you, will you come to dinner too? I am sure Hugh will ask him."

"Not to-day," answered Ruth, and she sat down, feeling as if she had no strength to stand.

"But you must meet him, you know, Ruth; it will only be awkward for a few minutes at first. It is astonishing how soon one gets used to things."

"Not everything," said Ruth, faintly; "I could not meet him to-day."

"Well, I shall just be the same to him; Hugh does not know you ever were anything to him, and father does not know; it's best just to ignore it, and treat him as an old friend."

"Yes."

"I think you had better come to-day and get it over at once?" urged Frances.

"No, I cannot; don't ask me; I would rather not go out to-day."

"All right, my dear, then I shall have the two young men to entertain all by myself, but that won't kill me. Well, I must be off now, I only came in to have a word with you, and see if we could persuade you and Audley to dine with us."

The sisters went down-stairs together, and found their husbands talking very amicably in the dining-room.

"Ruth," said Audley, addressing his wife, "Colonel Kenyon is good enough to wish us to dine with him again to-day, would you like to go?"

"No, not to-day, I have such a headache," answered Ruth.

"She's been complaining of a headache all the morning," said Audley, looking at Ruth, not unkindly; and when Frances and her husband were gone he went up to her and laid his hand on her shoulder.

"Is your head very bad, Ruth?" he asked. "Perhaps the smell of smoke makes it worse; if so I can go and smoke outside, if you would like to lie down here for an hour before Lady Hastings comes?"

It was seldom that he spoke so considerately, and Ruth felt almost grateful.

"I will go upstairs and bathe my head," she said; "it's not the smoke, I don't mind it."

And she went upstairs and put on a white gown with a soft silk scarf tied round her slender waist. She looked a pretty and very elegant young girl when Lady Hastings arrived, and she went down into the drawing-room to receive her husband's friend.

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Lady Hastings was also a pretty woman, a little well formed woman, with small features and brown eyes. She had married Sir James entirely for his money, and was not on the whole discontented with her lot. He had been a plump, short widower when she had married him, and he had now developed into a very stout little man. But he was perfectly harmless, and quite agreeable to entertain any number of young men whom Lady Hastings chose to invite.

Lady Hastings had admired Major Audley, it was said, before his marriage, and had felt somewhat piqued by that event. But she was perfectly ready to be on friendly terms with his wife, and received Ruth in her pretty gushing manner, and Audley felt pleased to see Ruth looking so attractive.

"You must often come to see us," said Lady Hastings. "Major Audley, promise now to bring her to Amherst? Sir James here will be delighted; he admires pretty women, you know; don't you, James?"

James smiled acquiescently; if he had a weakness it was a desire to be thought rather dangerous, which, poor man, he happily was not.

"I show my good taste then," he replied, in a thick voice, for his throat was very fat, which somehow seemed slightly to impede his utterance.

"We have a living proof of *your* excellent taste, Sir James," said Major Audley, looking with his bold, smiling eyes at Lady Hastings, who smiled coquettishly.

"What pretty things we are all saying to each other!" she said. "But I mean what I say, and men, you know," and again she smiled at Audley, "sometimes don't."

"That is unfair, and I protest against it," he answered.

"Well, will you promise to bring your wife very soon, then? Let us fix a day—will you come to luncheon next Tuesday?"

Before they left this was arranged, and they parted on very friendly terms, and Audley was evidently satisfied with the visit.

"What do you think of her?" he asked, after he had escorted Lady Hastings to the carriage, when he returned to the drawing-room.

"She is pretty, and seems very nice, I think," answered Ruth.

"She is a pretty little flirt ; all the same, I would rather be her admirer than her husband ; but she is good enough for Sir James."

Ruth gave a little laugh, and then turned away, wondering if she had married a "Sir James," if she could ever have acquired the easy light-heartedness of his wife. But she could not ; Lady Hastings was a shallow little woman, skimming on the surface of life, and her sentiments and feelings (of which she was apt to talk) were of the flimsiest nature. A wound to her vanity lasted longer than a wound to her heart, for her strongest emotions were connected with admiration, not love. She wished to win back Audley, merely for the pleasure of making him unhappy, not for the sake of any affection she felt to himself.

It was on a Saturday when she paid this first visit to 47 High-street, and somehow Audley was more amiable after it than he had been before. He laughed at her, but all the same he liked her flattery, for he also was vain, and Ruth had wounded his feelings to the quick.

But perhaps Lady Hastings' praise of his young wife's good looks had softened his heart to her, for he made no objections to spend the next day (Sunday) at Sudley, and then Ruth heard all about Seaforth's visit there.

"He was so agreeable," Frances told her, "and Hugh has taken quite a fancy to him ; likes him better than poor Beaton," and Frances smiled.

"And how does he look?" asked Ruth, with a certain ring in her voice that to an acute ear told its own tale.

"Well, of course, his face is very much marked, but still he is handsome—will always be handsome," answered Frances, who had mistaken the object of her inquiry.

"You mean Mr. Beaton. I was thinking of the other."

"Oh, Seaforth? Well, do you know he is changed somehow ; he looks older, and his manner is different ; he talks more, too, and very well, I can tell you, though he affects to be a little cynical occasionally. He asked after you."

"Yes," and a painful blush spread suddenly over Ruth's fair face.

"Just in an ordinary way, you know, my dear ; don't make a tragedy of it. I fancy he has got over his little tenderness very quickly, as they all do."

Ruth did not speak. Frances would not have said this

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if she had known the sharp pang her words plunged into Ruth's heart. Was it so then? Had he forgotten her so soon, thought the poor girl, and this Sunday at Sudley seemed to her the dreariest day. Frances, however, was in high spirits, and was as pleasant to Audley as if she had never spoken a word against him. These two indeed, who were always abusing each other when one was not present, seemed the best of friends when they met. True, Frances sometimes inwardly cowered before Audley's cold smiling gaze, which never let her quite forget he knew more than he ever hinted at with his tongue to her; and Ruth was too true and tender-hearted to repeat his hard words.

"I would manage him better than you do," Frances told Ruth, and there is no doubt that she could have done so, for she would have attacked a thinly-hidden weakness in his character. She would have flattered him, and it was incense to Audley's soul.

And he took Ruth to Amherst Hall on the appointed day, to see the other little woman who flattered him, with a smile on his face. Lady Hastings received them both gushingly, as was her wont, and Sir James did everything that was expected of him. She had married him for his money, and he gave it to her freely, and she liked him to be civil to her friends, and he always was.

"He is a good creature," she told her admirers, and in his slow, dense way he was contented with her, or at least dare not say he was not. Perhaps, sometimes, he may have vaguely wondered why she never talked to him, unless she wanted something, and why the small boy in the nursery knew very little of a mother's love. But he never expressed such sentiments, and grew yearly stouter, therefore they could not have troubled him acutely.

"I wanted to have you all to myself at lunch," she told Ruth, "so that we may get to know each other really, you know; but I have asked some people in the afternoon for tennis. That darling man, Colonel Kenyon, and your sister; I called on them yesterday, and they are coming, and three young men from the Fort, and the Hilliard girl, and the Lewishams, and one or two more."

"You are very kind," said Ruth, with a fast-beating heart.

Lady Hastings was alone with her when she said this, for Sir James had carried off Audley to see his grape-house and his peacheries, of which he was proud.

"Poor Sir James, they serve to amuse him," his wife said, smilingly, to Ruth; "but I fear he will sadly bore Major Audley."

Major Audley did look rather bored when the luncheon gong recalled the two men to the house.

"Why did you not go with us?" he said, in a low tone, to his hostess, as he sat by her side. "You are too cruel."

Sir James at this moment was telling Ruth in his husky voice of the number and beauty of the clusters of grapes he had cut from his favorite tree. And then he began to talk of his little son, and his dull face beamed.

"You must see the boy," he said; "my dear, Mrs. Audley would like to see the boy," he continued, addressing his wife.

"I dare say Mrs. Audley does not care to be troubled with children," she answered, repressively.

"Indeed I should," said Ruth; "do let me see him, Sir James."

Sir James looked gratified, and after luncheon was over, went himself to fetch the little heir, while Audley and Lady Hastings strolled out into the garden. He was a delicate, small boy, with a wistful look in his pale face, and he kept fast hold of his father's hand, and seemed very shy. But Ruth was fond of children, and she presently knelt down to show him how to play with some toy, and Sir James stood looking on. And while they were thus occupied, the drawing-room door opened, and a footman announced:

"Mr. Seaforth, Mr. Beaton."

Sir James went forward to receive his guests, and Ruth started to her feet. She had only a confused sense of what passed during the next few minutes, for everything seemed to swim before her eyes, and the words she heard were only as distant murmurs in her ears. Someone took her hand, and said ordinary words of greeting to her, but she made no reply; it was young Beaton, and presently Ruth vaguely understood this; understood, too, that someone else had also just touched her hand and then turned away.

"Lady Hastings is in the garden with Major Audley, she will be here presently," now said Sir James.

"And is this little fellow yours, Sir James?" asked Seaforth's voice; and Ruth lifted her eyes, and saw him stoop down, and caress the soft curly head of the child.

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"Yes," answered Sir James with pride; "and Mrs. Audley here has been good enough to play with him."

Then Seaforth looked at Ruth's face, and saw how greatly it was changed, and a feeling of pity suddenly began to replace the angry, jealous resentment in his heart.

"I dined with your sister and Colonel Kenyon last week," he said addressing her courteously; "I believe they are coming here this afternoon?"

"Yes," faltered Ruth, almost inaudibly.

Again Seaforth looked at her; looked at the fair face which had cost him so dear, and he understood that he was not forgotten; that this meeting was more cruelly painful to Ruth even than to himself.

But he had scarcely time to think this when Miss Hilliard was announced, and he began talking to the pretty lively girl, to hide his embarrassment. Then Lady Hastings and Audley entered the room by one of the windows which opened to the ground, and a few minutes later other guests came, and presently Colonel Kenyon and Frances.

There were soon sufficient people present to form two sets of tennis, and they began to pair off and make towards the grounds, which were behind the gardens in front of the house. Ruth saw Seaforth go out of one of the open windows with Miss Hilliard, and it added a pang to her aching heart. She refused to play, and went and sat on a garden seat under some trees, looking at the others. Frances and Colonel Kenyon and Beaton were playing in one set she saw, and her husband, Lady Hastings, Seaforth and Miss Hilliard, in another. She could hear their laughter and their voices, and she felt unutterably lonely and sad.

Sir James had retired to superintend the cutting of some grapes which his wife had ordered for the refreshment of her friends; and one or two people who were not playing Ruth did not know. As she sat silent and neglected, however, she suddenly felt a little hand put into hers, and looking down saw that the small boy, Jimmie Hastings, had crept shyly to her side.

"Why are you not playing?" he asked, looking up in her face with his wistful eyes. "Can you get no one to play with you?"

"That is it, Jimmie," she answered, and for a minute a mist of unshed tears dimmed her eyes. "I have no one now."

CHAPTER XXV.

HOME.

MASTER JIMMIE looked very gravely up in Ruth's face as she made this humiliating confession.

"If I was grown up," he said, consolingly, "I would play with you."

"Would you, you dear little boy," answered Ruth; "Will you come and sit by me, and talk to me now then?"

The little fellow consented, and Ruth lifted him up on the seat beside her, and listened smilingly to his childish talk. Jimmie had a great deal to say when he got a sympathetic hearer, and related various histories to Ruth of his pets, dead and living.

"You see," he said, "mother doesn't like dogs nor even cats. It's funny, isn't it, but it's quite true, so I have three cats that are kept out of sight. I'll tell you how I got 'em; one winter night, I think it was last winter, my father, who is a very good man, found a little kitten half frozen in the snow in one of the shrubberies, and he picked it up and took it into the harness-room, and it came quite unfrozen before the fire. And he took me to see it, and I asked if I might have it for my cat, and I called it Snow, though it's not white, but 'tabbie;' it's a great beauty."

"And how did you get the others, Jimmie?"

"Oh, Snow got 'em; they are very little 'uns; she brought them into the harness-room one night, for they were there in the morning; they are tabbies, too."

While Ruth sat listening to the child's artless prattle, Seaforth, though playing tennis, and talking and laughing with Miss Hilliard, was yet secretly watching her, and once their eyes met, though the next instant both quickly looked away. And he played so badly that when the sets broke up he declared he was completely out of practice, and that he would not make another exhibition of himself. Colonel Kenyon's kind eyes had also seen that Ruth was

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sitting somewhat neglected, and he, too, declined to play again, and went and stood by his young sister-in-law and her newly-found friend.

"And who are you, my little lad?" he said, stroking Master Jimmie's fair curls.

"I am James Gordon Augustus Hastings," answered little Jim.

"Upon my word, you have a lot of fine names," said Colonel Kenyon, looking with an amused glance at the boy's delicate, rather pinched face.

"My mother likes fine names; that's how I have 'm," said Jim. "Have your boys fine names, too?"

The Colonel laughed aloud, and blushed a little also; and then he called out to Kenard Seaforth, who was standing at a short distance from the little group under the trees.

"Come here, Seaforth," he said, "and be introduced to this fine little chappie;" and Seaforth, nothing loath, drew near.

"Can I get you any refreshment?" he asked Ruth, for he noticed how pale and cold she looked.

"I think I should like some tea," she answered, without looking up, and she slightly shivered as she spoke.

"I tell you what, my dear," said Colonel Kenyon, "you'll get cold if you sit any longer here. Come along with me into the house, and have some hot tea or coffee, or something. You'd better come too, Seaforth."

Ruth rose and took the child's hand in hers, and she, Colonel Kenyon, and Seaforth crossed the gardens together, and Audley, who was playing tennis, frowned as he saw them go.

But Ruth could find no words to say to her old friend. She could not lift her eyes to his face, and talk to him as if he were nothing to her. The last time they had spoken her arms had lain round his neck, and she had told him how her love would never change. How could she then now so completely ignore the past? It seemed impossible to her, and pale, silent and trembling, she walked between the two men, and when she entered the drawing-room she sat down with a weary sigh, which Seaforth heard.

And he, too, began thinking of their parting; of her promise never to forget him—a promise which seemed to him so quickly broken. He remembered how unhappy

she had seemed, and how her cheeks had been wet with tears when he had kissed them, and she had whispered, "Good-bye, my love—my only love." Yet a fortnight later she had married Audley! And the one motive that could account for this act, to Seaforth's mind, was naturally a contemptible one. Audley was the richer man, and her father and sister had persuaded her on this account to accept his proposal.

"And she is not happy," thought Seaforth, looking at her as he stood in Lady Hastings' drawing-room, while Colonel Kenyon was getting her some tea. He had made up his mind before he returned to Headfort to meet her and treat her with indifference. She had done him a cruel wrong, he told himself, and he was not going to seem a disappointed lover to a heartless flirt. The blow had hit him very hard, and he had tried hard to forget it, and it had not made him a better man.

But as he now glanced again and again at her face, he saw plainly written there that Ruth had gone through great mental sufferings. She had been a bright girl when he had first known her—a girl with a changeful expression and a sweet smile. But now the grey shadow of endured sorrow never varied. He watched her speak to Colonel Kenyon and the child who was standing by her knee, but the same sad look did not pass away.

"Poor Ruth," thought Kenard, and he too gave a restless sigh and turned aside. He went out into the gardens again, feeling unsettled and disturbed; if their parting had cost him dear, he knew now that she, too, had borne her share.

And he hugged this thought to his heart. Had he seen her smiling and happy he would have felt bitter and scornful, but he did not feel bitter nor scornful now. He pitied her for her supposed weakness, and he felt very indignant with Mrs. Kenyon; so indignant, that meeting her leaving the tennis ground with Beaton by her side, he passed them with a cold bow.

"Mr. Seaforth is not improved in appearance," said Frances to her companion.

"Is he not? He's a very nice fellow though," answered Beaton.

"Oh, yes, I daresay. Now will you do something to please me?" And Frances looked archly at the young man by her side with her bright hazel eyes.

"I will do anything you ask."

"Then be very good and go and flirt with Miss Hilliard for awhile; you must not always be my shadow, you know."

"I know, but I would rather dispense with the flirting with Miss Hilliard, and I have not spoken half-a-dozen words to you to-day."

"We are friends, and we do not need words to tell each other this; what I mean is, that in public you should talk sometimes to unmarried girls—in moderation." And Frances laughed softly.

"You think more of the world than anything else," said Beaton half-sulkily.

"Women must think of the world—if they don't they go to the wall."

"Very well, I will go and make violent love to Miss Hilliard."

"Please do nothing of the kind," said Frances gaily; "make yourself agreeable for ten—no, I think five—minutes; that is all I shall allow."

She had begun to play with his feelings thus, as she had played with them before her marriage, and Arthur Beaton's old infatuation still held strong hold on his heart. True, he told himself, she was not worth it; but he also told himself that she had married Colonel Kenyon because her father was so poor, because Colonel Forth had almost forced her to do so; and that she was only now trying to make the best of her loveless bargain.

Frances had said or insinuated all this to the young man's greedy ears, who had eagerly drunk in the honeyed poison. She had taken him round the gardens the first day he had dined at Sudley, under the pretext of showing him some comic paper which was lying on the table in the pavilion, and she had not wasted her time, for when they rejoined Colonel Kenyon and Seaforth she had almost entirely resumed her old power over him.

And she liked to think this; to think that she still held his heart fast in her keeping. It excited her, and elated her like wine, and she had never been more brilliantly beautiful than she looked that night; and as the two young men drove back to the Fort together, Beaton raved about her charms.

"She's a dangerous woman," said Seaforth, warningly.

But Beaton would take no warning, and in vain Seaforth pointed out to him that as Mrs. Kenyon had chosen to marry Colonel Kenyon—say for position and money—that she ought now to be content with her husband.

“Who says that she is not?” asked Beaton, sharply, for he was ever ready to take up the cudgels in her defence.

“All right, my dear fellow,” said Seaforth, good-naturedly, and the conversation ended; though Seaforth remembered it when he met Beaton and Mrs. Kenyon returning from the tennis-ground together. “I suppose she wants to make that poor lad as miserable as she has made Ruth,” he thought indignantly, and he began to feel the sincerest pity for Colonel Kenyon.

But Colonel Kenyon was quite happy. He smiled pleasantly when his handsome wife entered the drawing-room with young Beaton by her side, and Frances smiled and nodded in return. The Colonel was still talking to pale, drooping Ruth, who looked so ill that when Audley came into the room with Lady Hastings he at once noticed it.

“Have you got another of your headaches, Ruth?” he asked, going up to her.

“Yes,” she answered, and she put her hand up to her brow. This meeting with Seaforth had indeed been almost more than her strength could bear. And as Audley stood looking at her, the idea flashed across his brain that she had been upset by the sight of her old lover, and an angry, jealous pang darted through his heart.

“If you are not well, we had better go at once,” he said brusquely; and presently these two returned together to the house they called their *home*.

But never was this name given more untruly, if home means a spot where we can take safe shelter from the storms, worries, or pleasures of the world. Ruth was wearied and tired out by the emotions of the day, and Audley was sulky and disagreeable. They scarcely spoke to each other as he drove her back to Headfort, and when they reached 47 High Street, Audley took refuge in a brandy and soda and a cigar, and Ruth went upstairs and lay down on the bed, and could not restrain her tears.

She wept in the bitterness of her heart over her wrecked life and the miserable future that lay spread out in the long dark vista before her. She was only twenty, and she might live fifty years, perhaps more. Fifty years of weary

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bondage, of companionship that was hateful to her, bound by a tie from which there was no release !

And Kenard's face—the dear face with the half-reproachful, half-pitying look it had worn to-day—rose hauntingly before her. Ah, she knew that he must have thought that she was weak, that she was false ; and yet he was sorry. Ruth understood with that wonderful instinctive power which is one of the gifts of love, very nearly what had been passing in Kenard's heart. And yet she had scarcely looked at him, had not dared to look lest her eyes should tell too much.

Her eyes were red with tears, her hair, pushed back from her burning brow, was tangled and disorderly, her dress crushed and disarranged, when she heard her husband's heavy step ascending the staircase. She sprang up and tried to turn her face away from him as he entered the room, but Audley, who was still in a bad temper, quickly saw the signs of grief.

"So you have been crying, have you?" he said disagreeably. "May I ask what about?"

"I am tired, that is all," answered Ruth.

"You did not exert yourself particularly at Lady Hastings', at all events. I hate crying women. What's the good of crying; I ask you that?"

"I cannot help it!" burst out poor Ruth with renewed sobs. "Oh! do leave me alone, Richard. Surely I may be alone at least."

Something very like a curse broke from Audley's lips.

"You make a nice home for a man, I must say," he said, roughly and angrily, "and I'm about sick of it."

"Let me go back to my father, then?" answered Ruth. "I told you that nothing but misery could come of our marriage; I knew nothing else would come!"

"And you've only yourself to thank for it! I've done all I can to make you happy; but you're a cold, ungrateful, heartless woman, and it's impossible to please you."

"I will go away, then."

"Thank you; I am not going to allow you to make quite such a fool of me as that. No; I have married you—the worse luck!—but as you are my wife, I shall see you don't make an ass of me, as your sister seems inclined to do of old Kenyon! Be good enough to bathe your eyes; and don't let the servants amuse themselves at our expense, by saying there has been a row between us."

And he turned and left the room as he spoke, and the poor girl fell down on her knees by the bed, and prayed God she might die ; her home was too wretched for her to wish to live.

CHAPTER XXVI.

COLONEL KENYON'S BIRTHDAY.

THE next day, Frances drove into Headfort before luncheon with some news for her sister.

"My dear," she said as she entered the dining-room, where Ruth was sitting pale and disheartened, "isn't this delightful? I have talked Hugh over, and we are going to give a grand affair at Sudley on his birthday. It is on the 1st of October, so I hope you will look your prettiest on the occasion."

Ruth, who had risen to kiss her sister, did not seem at all excited by the news.

"We are going to have tennis in the afternoon first, then dinner in the pavilion at eight, because it holds more than the dining-room, and a dance afterwards ; and I mean to have the gardens lit up with Chinese lamps, and to make the whole place look beautiful."

"I hope you will have a fine day," said Ruth languidly.

"Of course I shall have a fine day ! By-the-bye, she's a jolly little woman, isn't she, Lady Hastings ? But what's the matter with you, Ruth, are you not well ? Hugh thought you looked ill yesterday."

"I felt ill yesterday, and don't feel over well to-day."

"I'm so awfully sorry. You saw Seaforth yesterday, I suppose. Did you talk to him ?"

"He spoke to me, that was all."

"Well, the first awkwardness is over then, and I daresay presently you'll become very good friends. I don't think I quite like him, you know ; he has certainly not improved since he went away."

"He was not likely to improve," said Ruth, with some bitterness.

"Why ? Oh, you mean because your love affair with him was broken off ? My dear, don't flatter yourself ;

men can bear a wound or two of that kind without showing a scar."

"I daresay."

Frances did not speak for a moment or two, then she went up to Ruth, and laid her hand lightly on her shoulder.

"You know I'm not given to preaching, yet I feel very much inclined to read you a lecture, Ruth. My dear, you are not behaving wisely to Audley; you are letting him see too plainly you do not care for him; not that I wonder at it, though."

"He knows very well I do not care for him; that I never shall care for him."

"But why let other people see it so plainly? I overheard remarks yesterday made about you, and one lady said she had never seen such an unhappy-looking bride. If Audley had heard that he would have been awfully angry, and, you know——"

"I am unhappy, most unhappy!" said Ruth, rising excitedly. "I asked him yesterday to let me go back to my father's house."

"Was that wise, Ruth?"

"I cannot bear my life," continued Ruth, walking up and down the room with clasped hands; "you do not know all I suffer."

"But why not make the best of it, as I do? I know you did not care for Audley when you married him, nor did I care for Hugh; yet you see I make Hugh content, though I may have my own feelings, too, on the subject."

"Hugh is quite a different man; he is honorable, he is high-minded; he did not force you to marry him by unworthy threats."

"No," and Frances' face flushed. "But is that a generous speech?"

For a moment Ruth was silent; then with sudden penitence and love, she went up and laid her head on Frances' shoulder.

"Forgive me," she half-whispered; "I did not mean to say anything; but he drives me half-wild."

"I know; he is selfish, and bad to get on with sometimes; I see all that—but Ruth, try to look a little happier for my sake; it makes me miserable to think your life has been sacrificed."

These words went straight to Ruth's heart.

"I will try," she said; "it put me out seeing Kenard Seaforth yesterday, and I broke down—yes, I know I am very foolish."

"That's a dear child! Try to make the best of Audley; he's a vain man, and other women flatter him, and you could manage him if you flattered him too. Look how Lady Hastings runs after him?"

"She is quite welcome," said Ruth, and Frances laughed.

"You are not a bit jealous of her then?"

"Jealous! *No.*"

"Yet I have known women who did not care one straw for their husbands to be very jealous of them. It is a feeling of vanity, I suppose."

"Then I have none; but don't let us talk about it any more, I will try to look brighter."

"Yes, do, dear; and now will you come over to Sudley and stay with us a day or two? I fancy the change will do you good, and then we shall have all the arrangements to make for the 1st, and no end of things to do. Where is Audley?"

"At the Fort, I suppose, but he will be in to lunch."

"Then I'll stay to lunch and see him, and persuade him, if I can, to let you come to us."

And Frances did this. Presently Audley came into the house, and Frances received him in her most winning fashion.

"Don't turn me out," she said, "for I have invited myself to lunch."

"Only too charmed to see you, of course," smiled Audley. "Where is Colonel Kenyon?"

"He has gone over to see one of his tenants, who wants some repairs to the farm buildings, and Hugh likes to look after these things himself."

"Quite right."

"I suppose it is; so I came to enquire after Ruth's headache, and do you know I think she wants a little change. If she came to us for a day or two, I am certain it would do her good, and you could come whenever you could get over, of course. What do you think?"

"You are very good," said Audley, glancing at Ruth.

He knew now very well that his marriage had been a foolish, wilful act, of which he had begun heartily to repent, and that last quarrel had made him feel very bitter

to her. Why not let her go for a day or two, he thought, glancing at her again; but Ruth never raised her eyes.

"Would you like to go to your sister for a day or so?" he said.

"Yes," answered Ruth; and after a few more words they settled it; Frances pressing Audley to go over to Sudley every day.

"Hugh will be delighted to see you," she said; "and Ruth and I shall have heaps to do about Hugh's birthday party; and you must help us, Major Audley? I mean to have colored lamps, and all sorts of pretty things. By-the-bye, talking of pretty things, what a very pretty woman your friend Lady Hastings is. If I were Ruth, I should be frightfully jealous of her."

Audley laughed, not displeased.

"Ruth condescends to be jealous of no one," he said.

"Well, if you were my husband, I should be jealous; a handsome man always has so much love made to him."

Again Audley laughed, yet he was vain enough to be pleased by the open flattery.

"Then I should have no chance of making you jealous," he said.

"Oh, yes, yes, you would! Just as if a man didn't know when he was good-looking? Women let them know the pleasing fact quickly enough."

Audley stroked his heavy moustache with no small satisfaction.

"I am not so fortunate," he said; but Frances knew very well with whom she had to deal, and smiled, well-satisfied, a few minutes later when they were alone, Ruth having left the room to make some preparations for her visit to Sudley.

"I only wish," he said, half in jest, half in earnest, "that Ruth had a little of your charming manner."

"Ruth has something more charming than manner," answered Frances gaily, "extreme youth; do not forget, pray, that I have had five years longer experience of the wiles and ways of the wicked world."

"Then it has improved, not spoiled you."

Frances made a coquettish little curtsy.

"For my part," she said, "I like worldly people, and those who do not pretend to be above the foibles of our race; for we are all tainted, you know?"

"Yes," answered Audley, looking at her steadily.

"Ruth is young, romantic, and thinks it right always to speak the truth, and so——"

"The truth in her case is often confoundingly disagreeable then, that's all I can say," said Audley, as Frances paused.

"We all say disagreeable things occasionally," she answered with a laugh, "and our beloved parent, you know, is a master of the art of nagging, or rather used to be," she added, a little scornfully, "for I assure you he has turned wonderfully pleasant to me now."

Audley, too, laughed; but she had contrived to put him in a better temper with himself and the world in general, and when Ruth came down-stairs, he went to the carriage with the two sisters, and promised to go over to Sudley to dine on the following day.

"I shall depend on your help for the 1st, you know," said Frances, looking back and nodding to him; but Ruth said nothing, and the husband and wife shook hands coldly enough, and that was all.

And this chill parting proved to be a longer one than either of them expected, for the next morning's post brought a letter from Audley for Ruth, to tell her that scarcely had she left Headfort when he had received a telegram to summon him at once to the sick-bed of his only sister. This lady, who was unmarried, and possessed of a good fortune, was Audley's nearest surviving relation, and had for some time been in delicate health. The telegram was peremptory, Audley wrote, and he was on the point of starting for his sister's house when he penned the letter to Ruth.

"If Mrs. Kenyon will allow you to remain at Sudley until my return, I think it will be a good arrangement," Ruth read, with a beating heart, and we may be sure that both the Colonel and Frances were delighted that Ruth should do this.

And Ruth went upstairs and breathed a sigh of relief, alas! of thankfulness, that for the next few days at least she would not see her husband's face. This knowledge seemed to take a weight off her heart somehow, and her girlish color stole back to her fair face, and her step grew lighter, and she was ready and willing to join in all Frances' plans for the entertainment on Colonel Kenyon's birthday.

"That little woman looks a different creature already,

with the air here," said the kindly Colonel to his wife, and Frances assented.

"I hope Miss Audley will keep very ill for some time," she said, smiling; but Colonel Kenyon shook his head at this unfeeling remark.

"Don't wish the poor lady to suffer long, dearest," he answered, for he ever thought considerably of others, and had strong sympathy for all those who pass heavily burdened on their way.

"Shall we ask Seaforth and Beacon to dinner to-morrow, Ruth?" asked Frances, later in the day. "He will help to amuse us."

"No, no," answered Ruth, with a vivid blush, "don't ask Kenard Seaforth while I am here, please, Frances; it is only painful to us both."

"We must ask him for the 1st, my dear."

"That is different, there will be a crowd; but I would rather not see him until then."

Nevertheless, two days later she did see him, for Colonel Kenyon announced that he had asked "Beaton and Seaforth" over for a day's shooting, and to stay all night, and dine at the Park.

"There, you can't help yourself," said Frances, to her sister, when Colonel Kenyon had left the room; "my dear, take my advice, and treat him in a friendly fashion, and it will all become quite easy to you in a very short while."

And Ruth resolved to try to do this. The first painful meeting was over, and it is certainly strange how we become used to things, and fall into ways we are forced to tread. Ruth and Seaforth met again, certainly with embarrassment, but still without the overwhelming emotion of the first meeting. They shook hands, and by-and-bye Ruth found herself talking quietly enough to her old friend. The three men had come in for afternoon tea after the day's sport, and Frances in a charming tea-gown smiled her welcome; Beaton going at once to her side and remaining there, fascinated beyond the power of his own will to turn away.

Presently the Colonel, having drunk his tea, went to have a smoke, but the two young men lingered in the drawing-room. It was thus impossible for Seaforth and Ruth not to talk to each other, and in a little while they found that words came to them very easily. They did not speak

much of past nor coming days, but of the things around them, though Seaforth did once allude to their former intimacy. There was a stand of flowers close by them, for Frances loved to fill her rooms with the choicest she could procure, and Seaforth began talking of these, telling Ruth of some rare orchids he had seen when he was away.

"I am afraid my taste still clings to the simplest flowers," said Ruth with a smile ; "even wild flowers."

"I remember you used to gather them," answered Seaforth in a low tone.

Ah, what memories those words recalled to her heart ! Nay, scarcely memories ; days that lived always imprinted on her brain, when she had wandered in the fields with her lover, and plucked the scarlet poppies by the way.

"Yes, long ago," she said, and her head drooped, and he watched the color come and go on her smooth fair cheeks.

He looked at her for a moment or two, and then changed the conversation, asking her about the party to be given in honor of Colonel Kenyon's birthday.

"You are going to have great doings here on the 1st, I am told," he said considerably.

"Yes, Frances is bent on making it quite a success, as it is Colonel Kenyon's birthday, you know. We are to have a band, and a banquet, and a dance, I believe, to wind up with."

"Will you keep me a dance?"

"Yes, I shall be very glad."

And so in this commonplace strain they talked, interrupted occasionally by Frances' soft laughter, and the murmur of Beaton's voice. He was standing with his back to them, looking down with his grey expressive eyes at the beautiful woman who was lying back in an easy chair before him, toying with a feather fan. And what were they saying? Foolish words of coquettish jesting on her part ; on his, ardent expressions of scarcely veiled tenderness and admiration, which Frances loved to listen to.

Suddenly she started up and declared it was time to dress for dinner, and she and Ruth left the room together, followed a moment or two later by the young men, who went out on the terrace before the house to smoke cigarettes, both thinking of the women they had just left, though neither mentioned the sisters.

They all met at dinner, and then afterwards went out into the still dark gardens to fix about the illuminations on the night of the *fête*. The Colonel made a joke of the whole affair, and tried to laugh Frances out of the idea of the Chinese lamps her heart was set upon.

"Then I shall not consult you any more," she said playfully. "Mr. Beaton, you come with me, and we will fix where to hang them."

He followed her, only too gladly, under the shadowy trees; and Colonel Kenyon, Ruth and Seaforth, walked slowly behind them, talking pleasantly as they went, and gradually Ruth and Seaforth grew more at ease.

And the next morning it was the same thing. Ruth came down to breakfast in a white gown, and looked so like the fair young girl Seaforth had loved and wooed, that the bitter days of her desertion seemed somehow to fade from his mind. They stood on the terrace and talked together with the sunshine falling on Ruth's uncovered head, and it was only when he parted with her to return to Headfort that the old gloom stole over Seaforth's heart.

"I cannot understand it," he told himself, restlessly; "a girl like that to throw a man over that she cared for— for she did care for me—because another man had a few more hundreds a year; and yet she did it."

He did not go any more to Sudley until the day of the party on Colonel Kenyon's birthday, but Beaton went several times, making the excuse that he was assisting Mrs. Kenyon about the decorations, which, in truth, he was. Major Audley was still absent, and wrote to Ruth that it was impossible for him to leave his sister, who continued to be in great danger. Ruth thus remained at Sudley, and stood by Frances to receive her guests, when one after the other all the people of the neighborhood who were of any note gathered together in honor of Colonel Kenyon and his young wife.

They looked two beautiful women, the sisters, standing side by side, and so thought their proud father, and the fond husband of one, whose eyes rested again and again on his Frances' face.

And other eyes watched that face too, young, ardent, passionate eyes, that found their heaven there, and saw no beauty in all the other fair women around. And Frances knew this, and it made her glad and her heart to glow

with secret triumph, and she smiled on him, though they exchanged few words ; but Arthur Beaton felt that he must be content with these, and for her sake kept away from her side.

It was not until the afternoon was far advanced and the sun was beginning to dip behind the trees, that he went up to her, pale and agitated. A few minutes before his soldier servant had sought him out among the crowd assembled on the lawn, and had placed a telegram in his hand, which had been sent on to him from Headfort, and as Beaton read it a great change passed over his face.

He re-read it, hesitated, and then walked up to the beautiful hostess, who was standing surrounded by a little group.

"Can I speak to you for a moment?" he said, and something in his expression checked the gay refusal she had been about to make, to what she considered an imprudent request.

"If you wish it, yes," she answered, and she moved a few steps apart from her other friends, one or two of whom exchanged glances as she did so.

"I have something to tell you," said Beaton, in an agitated whisper.

"Well?" she asked, looking at him with her bright eyes.

"My brother died yesterday, suddenly, of heart disease," continued Beaton, "my eldest brother."

"What! Sir Robert? Then you are now——"

They looked at each other and said nothing ; they were both thinking of "what might have been ;" but Frances was the first to recover her self-possession.

"Then I suppose you must go?" she said, in a low tone. "I shall see you soon again?"

"Yes," he answered, wrung her hand and turned away, and Frances went back to the group she had left.

"That poor young man," she said, addressing one of the ladies present, "has just received the news that his eldest brother, Sir Robert Beaton, is dead."

There was a chorus of politely-expressed regret, and then everyone began talking of the heir.

"If that young fellow is the next brother," said Sir James Hastings, "he has come in for a good thing ; I know something of the Beatons, and the old man died worth between seventeen and eighteen thousand a year."

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CHAPTER XXVII.

A HAPPY BIRTHDAY.

THE account of Sir Robert Beaton's sudden death spread very quickly among the guests at Sudley, and it required all Frances' self-command to carry herself as gaily and unconcernedly as she had done before she heard the news.

She could not in truth put it out of her mind. She had listened to what Sir James Hastings had said about the large income that Arthur Beaton must have inherited, and the words seemed to ring in her ears. She went up to Ruth on the first opportunity she could find, and whispered a question to her.

"Have you heard?" she said.

"About Mr. Beaton's brother?" answered Ruth, looking at her sister quickly, and seeing very plainly the signs of suppressed excitement written on her handsome face.

"Yes," said Frances, in a low tone; "it's a strange thing, isn't it? A strange thing," she repeated, and she moved away, and Ruth's eyes followed her with some uneasiness.

A minute or two later, Colonel Forth also went up to his youngest daughter, full of the same tidings.

"Have you heard about Beaton, Ruth?" he said.

"What confounded luck some people have, to be sure!"

"He may have been fond of his brother," smiled Ruth.

"Fond! rubbish. Fonder of sixteen or seventeen thousand a year, which they say he has come into," answered the Colonel.

"Still it's a very sad thing; Sir Robert must have been quite a young man, if Mr. Beaton is the next brother?"

"Well, Sir Arthur, as I suppose we must call him now, is a deuced lucky young man, that's all I can say," said Colonel Forth; and this opinion was very generally thought, though not quite so openly expressed.

"A great change for our young friend, truly," said the Vicar of Headfort, approaching the father and daughter, who were still talking of Arthur Beaton. "But I have no

doubt, judging by what I have seen of him, that he will make a wise and judicious use of the large fortune so unexpectedly bestowed on him."

"More likely to make ducks and drakes of it, I should think," growled the Colonel.

"Nay, nay, my dear sir," smiled the urbane vicar; "even if in the light-heartedness of youth we were to spend a little lavishly at first, this exuberance of spirits will soon pass away, and the *duties* of his new position will become clear to his eyes."

"We all know what you parsons think are the *duties* of a rich man," said the Colonel, with his sour smile; "you had best get hold of him before your clerical brethren do, Appleby."

But the Rev. John only smiled benignly. He had leaning on his arm a tall, rather good-looking middle-aged woman, whom he presently introduced to Ruth and Colonel Forth, and this lady proved to be very voluble; and while she was talking to Ruth the Vicar had a word to whisper about her in the Colonel's ear.

"Mrs. Dixon is one of the lucky ones, also, as regards fortune," he said, in an aside. "She is a widow, a distant relative of my own, and largely endowed."

There was something about money to Colonel Forth—and, indeed, to most of us—irresistibly attractive. He would not have looked the second time at Mrs. Dixon unless he had heard she was rich, but now he glanced at her with his bloodshot eyes, and the widow smiled as he did so.

"What a charming place your daughter's is, Colonel Forth," she said, "and she is so beautiful."

"People say she is good-looking," answered the Colonel, with a feeling of gratification, which he would not have felt had the flattering words issued from the lips of a poor acquaintance.

"There is no doubt of it," continued Mrs. Dixon; "and this other sweet creature," and she bent her head a little closer to the Colonel's, and indicated that she was speaking of Ruth, who was exchanging a few mild words with the Vicar, "is a daughter too?"

"Yes, the youngest; but can I not get you an ice or something?" asked Colonel Forth.

"Well, I am thirsty, I'll admit!" said Mrs. Dixon, smil-

ing, and a moment or two later she was to be seen leaning on the Colonel's stalwart arm, and the middle-aged couple retired together into the house, where the most lavish refreshments were to be found.

Ruth was thus left alone with the Rev. John, who offered her his arm, and as the two went through the crowd they encountered Kenard Seaforth, with whom Ruth had only exchanged a few words.

She blushed and smiled slightly as they met, and the young man paused, and after a moment's hesitation joined her.

"I have been seeing Beaton off," he said. "I suppose you know?"

"Yes, we have been talking of it; it is a strange turn of fortune, isn't it?"

"Wonderful; and he seems very much cut up and excited. I think he was fond of his brother."

"I should think he was a young man of warm feelings."

"Yes," and Seaforth's expression slightly changed. "He will be a rich man now," he added, with a little wring of bitterness, which was never formerly to be heard in his tones; "he will have it all his own way now."

Ruth made no answer. She raised her shadowy eyes and looked for a moment in his face, and there was something reproachful in their expression, which though naturally Seaforth did not understand, yet touched his heart.

She was looking very pretty, with a faint flush on her cheeks; and her pale grey silk dress with silver embroidery, and a broad silver band round her slender waist, well suited her delicate and refined appearance. She wore also a large hat, with grey sweeping feathers, and many of the guests at Sudley declared they admired her most of the two sisters. Seaforth had always done this, and to-day she seemed very lovely in his eyes. He lingered by her side, and he wished the Vicar would go away; and the Vicar who was no fool, began to perceive this, and with the semi-tender smile which he indulged in to good-looking young women when the upright wife of his bosom was not present, he turned to Ruth.

"Will you excuse me a few minutes, my dear Mrs. Audley?" he said. "I see over yonder one of my parishioners, who, poor lady, being afflicted with partial

deafness, may not yet have received much attention, like you beautiful young creatures naturally command. Ah, ah, you smile, my dear young lady, but is it not so? It is but human nature, is it not, Mr. Seaforth? But we poor parsons must sometimes put our inclinations into our pockets," and he smiled and took off his hat, and went away.

"He's rather good fun, the parson, isn't he?" said Seaforth.

"He's very amusing; he always makes me laugh."

"Shall we take a little turn; it is getting rather cold for you to stand about, don't you think?"

"It is a little chill," answered Ruth, and the two moved on together, going along one of the walks cut through the lawn until they came to the broad belt of lofty trees which divided the gardens from the park, and behind which the sun had now set.

It was getting dusk, in fact, and many of the guests had gone into the house, either to drink tea or make some little change in their dress before the dinner hour, which was to be at eight o'clock. But Seaforth and Ruth did not leave the shadowy, quiet, broad path beneath the trees for nearly half-an-hour. Yet there was not a word exchanged between them that the whole company might not have heard. But there was a subtle, dangerous joy felt by each, which they knew, though neither of them analysed it, that made these moments very precious. And Audley's absence was also an immense relief to them both. He had forced this poor girl to marry him, but he could not force her to regard him otherwise than with shrinking dislike.

At last, unwillingly, Ruth suggested it must be time for her to go in, and Seaforth saw that it only wanted a few minutes to eight o'clock.

"I suppose," he said, smiling, "you will have to go in to dinner with one of the big guns?"

"My big gun," answered Ruth, smiling also, "is, I believe, Sir James Hastings; so Frances arranged this morning, at least."

"But you will keep a dance for me?"

"Yes; I mean to dance very little. I do not care for it, you know."

"The first waltz, then?"

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"Very well;" and this having been settled they walked together to the house, which was now fully lighted and the drawing-room crowded.

Ruth went quietly in, and presently fat little Sir James Hastings approached her.

"I believe that I am to have the honor of escorting you to dinner?" he said.

"I think so," smiled Ruth.

"I shall tell my little boy at home that I have seen you; I assure you that you have made quite a conquest of his youthful heart," and Sir James smiled.

"He is a dear little fellow."

"He is sensitive and affectionate; yes, yes, I hope a fine disposition."

"He told me his father was a very good man."

"Did he, indeed?" said the delighted Sir James. "It is astonishing how observing children are, to be sure!"

But a movement now took place among the company, and Colonel Kenyon, with Lady Hastings on his arm, led the way to the pavilion, where the banquet was spread out, followed by the guests, Frances being escorted by Lord St. Clair, whose wife was unavoidably absent.

In the pavilion wealth and good taste had made everything almost perfect. The beautiful hostess and the kindly, genial host sat smiling among their guests, and presently Lord St. Clair rose up to propose Colonel Kenyon's health, and on this, the anniversary of his birthday, to wish him long years of life and happiness.

"Since last year at this time," went on the white-haired old nobleman, smiling and turning to Frances with his courteous manner, "my friend, Colonel Kenyon, has chosen a wife, to whom any of my poor words of praise must fail to do justice. It will be enough then for me to add that the name of the beautiful mistress of Sudley should be joined to that of her gallant and distinguished husband. I therefore propose the health of Colonel and Mrs. Kenyon."

It is needless to tell that this toast was responded to with the warmest enthusiasm. And a glow stole to Colonel Kenyon's face, and a tender light to his eyes, as he rose to return thanks for the good wishes of his friends and neighbors.

"I heartily thank Lord St. Clair, and all my friends," he

said, in his clear, sweet-toned voice, "for the kind words we have just listened to. For myself I shall say nothing; I was born amongst you, and you know all my faults and failings, of course, very well," and he gave his genial laugh. "But of my young wife I must say a word or two. She is only a stranger to you yet; but I hope the day will come when she will no longer be a stranger, when you will all look upon her as a friend, and welcome her as gladly to your homes as she now heartily welcomes you to her own. I think that I had better not say any more, lest I am tempted to say too much, but this I will add—and I thank God that I am able to say it—*this* is the happiest birthday of my life. Last year I was a lonely man with few joys if not many cares; now I am happier than I deserve, and you know to whom I owe this;" and again he looked at Frances, and sat down. And Frances smiled and cast her bright hazel eyes upon her plate, and then turned to whisper some pleasant words to Lord St. Clair behind her fan.

"This must be a proud moment to you," said the supposed rich widow, Mrs. Dixon, to Colonel Forth, who had carried his attentions so far as to take her in to dinner.

"Well, I suppose it ought to be," he answered. And it was. He glanced round the table, and then at his daughters, and his heart expanded with gratification to think how well he had done for them.

"Colonel Kenyon is an old and very intimate friend of my own," he said; "and thus he came to marry my daughter, and I am very well satisfied with the match."

"Indeed you have every reason; Colonel Kenyon seems a delightful man; they are a charming couple."

Mrs. Dixon apparently was a lady who thoroughly believed that every human soul can be effectually assailed by flattery. She piled it on without stint all round, and she left a pleasing impression on Colonel Forth's mind. He had not received very much, poor man, all his life, for he had never been popular, and his daughters did not overwhelm him with soft words. And so agreeable did they now seem to him, that when the banquet broke up and the company passed through the gardens, all alight now with the pretty lamps that Arthur Beaton had helped to arrange, Mrs. Dixon was leaning still on Colonel Forth's arm, though he inwardly felt he was making rather an

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exhibition of himself, and would gladly have deposited the lady in some convenient seat.

The dancing took place in the dining-room, which was prepared as a ballroom; and the opening dance, a quadrille, being over, Kenard Seaforth went up to Ruth and claimed her promise to dance the first waltz with him.

With a blush and a smile she rose, and as the two glided gracefully round the room, a strange excitement began to stir in Seaforth's breast; an excitement which made him forget certain rules that he had laid down for his own guidance in regard to Ruth.

"Let us go out on the terrace for a moment or two," he said, as the dance finished. "It is so hot in here, isn't it?"

And Ruth went with him, and they stood together in silence looking down at the dark trees, on which the twinkling lights shone and glowed in diverse colors. It was a pretty sight, and as Seaforth glanced at the delicate profile of his companion, a sudden resolution entered his heart, and bending nearer to her he said quickly and excitedly:

"I never can understand, Ruth, why you treated me so!"

He felt her hand tremble on his arm, but she answered him, almost steadily:

"I know you can never understand it, Kenard; but we must not speak of it."

"I know that well enough; but why did you do it? Why did you throw me over?"

"Because I could not help myself; not because I had changed."

The words were almost whispered, but Kenard heard them, and a throb of joy passed through his heart.

"You made me very miserable," he said, in a low tone.

"My dear," said Frances' voice close to them, before Ruth could make any reply, "I've been looking for you; here is a telegram which has just arrived, I suppose from Major Audley."

Ruth turned very pale, and opened her telegram with trembling fingers; it was from Major Audley, to tell her that his sister had died during the afternoon; and thus the news that two souls had been summoned suddenly away reached Sudley when everything there seemed so bright and gay.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

NEAR RELEASE.

NEITHER Kenard Seaforth nor Ruth danced again during the evening after the news of Major Audley's sister's death had arrived. Ruth went back to the dining-room with Frances, and sat quietly down on one of the benches covered with red cloth arranged against the walls of the room, and Kenard followed her, and stood near her for a while, and then went out and walked up and down on the terrace alone, trying of course in vain to solve the reason of her conduct to him.

"It must be something else; it could not be for Audley's money alone," thought the young man, and then his brow darkened. "Curse it!—and that fellow will be coming back again now, I suppose; I can't stand this sort of thing, that's the truth—I must exchange and go out to India, for I like her too well, and can't help myself."

He almost made up his mind to do this. He expected his company daily, and when he got it he would leave the regiment and keep out of sight of the fair sad-faced woman he believed loved him still.

"If she would only tell me the truth," he thought restlessly; "perhaps when she hears I am going away she will do so; it will be worth while, for to be near her as things are now is only pain."

Presently he went back into the ball-room, but Ruth was no longer there. And he felt disappointed, though he had told himself a few moments before that to be near her gave him no happiness. It did not, and yet the sweet pain seemed better to him than to find her gone. He grew weary of the whirling figures passing and re-passing him, of the light jests and aimless words that fell on his ears.

"What's the good of it all?" he said impatiently to Mr. Martin, who was in the same regiment, and who had gone up to him and said, "Isn't this a jolly dance?"

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"Good?" repeated Martin, looking at Seaforth's gloomy face in astonishment; "why, isn't it good to enjoy yourself?"

"If you can," answered the other; and the good-natured lad, whose face was crimson with his exertions, wondered in his heart what had come over Seaforth to put him out.

Ruth in the meanwhile had stolen upstairs to her bedroom, and was sitting in the semi-darkness thinking how difficult and dark was her life. She could not help caring for Seaforth, she had always cared for him, and his sudden question on the terrace had made the old wound bleed anew. Ah! it had been cruel, too cruel, this enforced separation, this rending apart of love that would not die.

And her marriage?—the miserable band that chained her, and chafed her, and made her days a long struggle to endure what she could not escape. It was a gloomy picture, with one bright side. Frances was happy, and for Frances she had made the self-sacrifice, the bitterness of which her own heart only knew.

"And he will be coming back again now, I suppose," she thought miserably. "Oh, I do so wish he would stay away."

How many a time she had wished this since Audley had left her! She had looked and felt a different creature during the last few days, and her heart abhorred the idea of returning to the old bondage.

"He knows I hate him; why does he make me stay?" she had asked herself again and again, and she asked herself this question now.

But while she was sitting sad and lonely upstairs, downstairs Frances was receiving the compliments and adulation that her soul loved, and was seemingly a woman standing on one of the very pinnacles of good fortune.

"Are you satisfied with the day, dearest?" her fond husband had whispered to her as the evening began to wane and the guests to depart; and she had said "Yes," and smiled, all the while with a strange unrest stirring in her heart, when she thought of what had happened to Arthur Beaton.

But as her husband's friends crowded round her to say good-bye, each with a complimentary word, Frances exerted herself to be agreeable to everyone, and tried her best to

put Beaton's good fortune out of her mind. Presently Seaforth and young Martin, who were going to drive home together, went up to her to say good-night, and Frances smiled on them as she had smiled on the rest.

"Come again very soon," she said to Seaforth.

"Yes; will you say good-bye to your sister for me?" he answered.

"Ruth? Where is she? I wonder where she is?" answered Frances, looking round.

She was nowhere to be seen, and the young men went away, and when they were gone, and the rooms were cleared, Frances went upstairs to seek for Ruth. She found her alone in the half-dark room, and as Frances lit some of the candles on the toilet-table to look at herself, glancing round she saw on Ruth's face the marks of recent tears.

"What is the matter? Are you not very well, Ruth?" she asked. "Seaforth was asking for you a few minutes since to bid you good-bye."

"The room was hot downstairs," answered Ruth, "so I came up for a few minutes' quiet. Are all the people gone? I heard the music cease."

"Yes, thank heavens, everyone is gone. What a day it has been. And about Arthur Beaton. I cannot help thinking about it. Fancy, Ruth, if this had happened a few months ago how it would have changed everything."

"You mean——"

"I mean I should never have been Mrs. Kenyon, my dear, as you know very well! But it is no good talking of it."

"No, indeed, Frances; and after all what is he? A good-looking boy——"

Frances did not speak for a moment as Ruth paused and hesitated. She began walking up and down the room, and then again she went up to the toilet, and looked at herself long and earnestly in the glass.

"How do you think I look to-day?" she asked.

"Very well indeed; your dress is beautiful."

"He was very much upset when he came to tell me, poor fellow," said Frances, the next moment, her mind once more returning to Beaton; "they say he will be immensely rich—fifteen or sixteen thousand a year. Well, one never can tell what will happen, certainly. I suppose Audley will come in for his sister's money, too?"

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"I am sure I don't know, and I don't care."

"There will be a letter from him to-morrow morning, I suppose, to tell you; however, if you won't come downstairs, I think I'll say good-night, Ruth, as this has been such an exciting day. I am dead tired." And she kissed Ruth and went away; but Ruth sat still long after she was gone, thinking of her unhappy life, and wishing with all her heart she could find any escape from it.

And the next morning did bring her a letter from Audley, to tell her that his sister's death would nearly double his present income; and he also told her that immediately after the funeral he should return to Headfort.

"Ask your sister to drive you there on Monday morning," he wrote; "I expect to arrive about twelve o'clock, and by-the-bye you must go into mourning of course for poor Agnes; if you want money I can send you some;" and so on.

And with a miserable heart poor Ruth was forced to obey these orders. Her black gowns, which she was obliged to wear for one whom she had never seen, were not more gloomy than her thoughts as she prepared to return to her husband's roof. Both Colonel Kenyon and Frances saw how depressed she was, but what could they do to help her? Nothing, they told each other—and somehow Frances shrank from speaking to Ruth of her too evident unhappiness.

At last the day came when she had to leave Sudley, and Frances drove her into Headfort. It was a dull, grey morning, and the house in High Street looked very dreary as the two sisters entered it.

"Send out for some flowers to brighten the room up," said Frances, looking round; "you ought to seem glad to see him, you know."

"I don't want to seem glad to see him," answered Ruth; and Frances was half afraid to say anything more.

She stayed with Ruth till Audley arrived, and did her best to receive him pleasantly; but there was a frown on Audley's brow, for when he entered the room he went up to Ruth and bent down as if he meant to kiss her but Ruth turned away her head.

He said nothing, but an angry look passed over his face and remained there in spite of Frances' soft words.

"We were all so dreadfully sorry," she said, "that you

were away on Hugh's birthday ; and still more sorry when the sad news came about your poor sister."

"It was very good of you," answered Audley, curtly.

"I suppose you know about Beaton's windfall?" he added.

"Yes. Was it not odd the telegram to tell him of his brother's death was sent on to him to Sudley at the birthday party too. Have you heard from him?"

"Yes, I had a few lines ; it's an extraordinary piece of luck."

"And," hesitated Frances, "did he say anything about leaving the regiment?"

"Not a word, he said he would be back here in a week."

Frances asked no more questions, and shortly afterwards took her leave, after pressing Audley to go to Sudley soon. And after she was gone, Audley turned savagely on Ruth.

"I must say," he said, "the way you received me was a little too disgusting."

Ruth made no answer. She stood there, pale and cold in her black gown, and never even looked in his face.

"I tell you what it is, Ruth, I won't stand it," went on Audley, passionately ; "you married me——"

"You forced me to marry you, you mean," interrupted Ruth, with kindling eyes.

"Well, I forced you to marry me then, if that pleases you better ; but at all events you did marry me, and if this is the way you mean to carry out the contract, I tell you plainly I will not put up with it."

"I wish to leave you ; let me go to my father's ; we should be far happier apart."

"Then you were happier, I suppose, when I was away?" asked Audley, with strong indignation.

"You know very well I am not happy here," said Ruth, now looking straight in his angry face ; "you must feel, you must see this, and it's only misery to us both to go on living as we do. My father, I am sure, will take me in ; let me go to-day."

He caught her fiercely by the wrist, and swore at her.

"Go at your peril !" he thundered. "Go if you dare ! And do you think if you leave me I shall keep Mrs. Kenyon's fine secret ? By heavens, I won't then ; if you think you can make a fool of me, as you try to do, I'll have my revenge, I can tell you."

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Ruth's pale face grew paler, and there was a look in her eyes that made Audley feel half ashamed of his brutal words.

"You bring it on yourself," he said, sulkily; "I've had trouble enough lately, and to come home and be received without a civil word is enough to put any man out. Confound it! I wish I had never seen your face!" And he turned in a rage and left the room, furiously slamming the door behind him.

And Ruth stood still after he had gone, with a look of unutterable scorn in her eyes; scorn and bitter, bitter dislike, almost hatred. "This was too much," she said, thinking, "to threaten Frances!" It seemed to her the basest meanness, the lowest thing he could have said, and her contempt was very great.

"I wish either he or I were dead?" she said aloud, and then sat wearily down, and presently she heard Audley leave the house, and looking up as he passed the windows she saw he had put on his uniform, and that he went straight to the Fort.

He did not come in for luncheon, and Ruth spent the afternoon alone. There was some heavy gun practising going on at the Fort, and the loud booming sound occasionally fell on her ears. About four o'clock there seemed a tremendously loud explosion, so loud that Ruth rose and went to the window, and a few minutes later a soldier ran out of the Fort gates in hot haste. Then another followed, and another; and people began to gather round the gates, but were prevented from entering by the sentry. Presently a doctor, whom Ruth knew by sight, came running down the village with the soldier who had evidently been sent for him. Something had happened, apparently, at the Fort, for Ruth could see the grave faces outside, and the excitement of those gathered round the gates.

She stood watching, and as she did so Kenard Seaforth came hastily out of the Fort gates, and straight to the door of Ruth's house. She heard the bell ring with a fast-beating heart, and a minute later he came quickly up the stairs, and entered the drawing-room, and held out his hand for a moment without speaking.

Ruth noticed he was very pale, and that there was a shocked look on his face, and she began to understand that something dreadful had occurred.

"There has been an accident at the Fort," began Seaforth, with a sort of effort. "The artillerymen were practising with the big guns there, and one has just burst, from an over-charge, I suppose, and I regret to tell you Major Audley is hurt."

Ruth never spoke. She stood there with wide-open eyes, listening to Seaforth's words.

"And I ran to tell you," he went on, "because they are going to bring him home immediately, and I thought it would be a less shock to you if you knew; it's a terrible thing—poor Martin!"

"What!"

"He is killed outright, poor fellow; but Major Audley is only wounded, and the doctors are doing all they can for him."

"And—Mr. Martin is dead. How terrible!"

"Yes, poor Martin and two artillerymen. Major Audley and Martin were standing together watching the practice, when the gun burst. Ah, here they are, bringing him out. Come from the window, Ruth."

He took her hand and pulled her back as he spoke, while the body of her husband, lying on a stretcher and covered with a military cloak, his face also being covered with a handkerchief, on which blood stains were visible, was borne by four soldiers through the sympathising group collected round the Fort gates. Two doctors were also with him, one holding the wrist of the wounded man.

Ruth stood with blanched face and parted lips, grasping Seaforth's hand while he was carried into the house, and then when they heard the soldiers begin to ascend the staircase with their burden, Seaforth hastily shut the drawing-room door.

"No, no," he said, as Ruth mutely indicated she wished to go to meet them. "You must not see him at present; he is unconscious; the doctors would not wish you to see him I am sure."

"Still I must go," said Ruth, with her dry lips, and she opened the door; opened it on a terrible sight.

The soldiers had just paused on the first landing by the drawing-room door, and the handkerchief over Audley's face had slipped aside, and Ruth saw a scarred and bleeding mass; but only for a moment.

"Keep Mrs. Audley away, Seaforth," Dr. Murray called

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out, as soon as his eyes fell on Ruth's pale, horror-stricken face ; and Seaforth needed no second bidding.

"You must come back," he said, and he drew her firmly away, and again shut the room door, and Ruth sank down on a seat and covered her face with her hands.

"Oh ! this is dreadful," she said, "too dreadful ! "

"Yes, but you must not give way," answered Seaforth, very kindly and gently, for he was deeply moved. "He is badly hurt, but when his wounds are dressed he will look quite different."

Ruth gave a sort of moan and started to her feet, in a sudden agony of self-reproach ; the thought had flashed across her mind that she had wished him dead this very afternoon, and now he might die !

"And that other young man," she asked presently in a low excited tone, walking backwards and forwards with irregular steps. "He was at Frances' dance, was he not ? And now, and now——"

"Hush ! Do not think of it. Would you like me to send for your sister and Colonel Kenyon ?"

"Yes, please. Oh, Kenard," and Ruth caught his hand, "ask them to let me go to him—to do what I can."

"Yes," and for a moment he held her hand fast in his ; "but wait a little while, just until the doctors see what will be best to be done."

She did not speak again. She sat down once more, cold, pale, and faint, and a few minutes later Colonel Forth, who had heard of the accident, came into the room.

"This is a bad business, Ruth," he said, and he went up and laid his hand with some kindness on her shoulder ; "but they say he may pull through."

"Have you seen him, father ?" she asked, in a trembling voice.

"The doctors won't let anyone into the room at present ; but I have seen Murray, and they say one of his legs will have to be amputated."

"Take me to him, father ; please take me to him," moaned Ruth.

"My dear, you couldn't do the least good, and women are only in the way in a case like this. Keep yourself quiet, and I'll send for Frances."

"I will go upstairs and see how he is getting on," said Seaforth, and he left the room for the purpose, and Ruth

was alone with her father for the next few minutes. Then Seaforth returned.

"He is rallying," he said, "and they will perform no operation to-day—until his system recovers from the shock."

"I will go beside him then," and Ruth rose as she spoke.

"No," said Seaforth, "the doctors positively forbid it. Dr. Murray told me to tell you that at present you must not see him."

"I should like to go into the next room, then," said Ruth, in a faint voice. "Father, help me into the next room."

Colonel Forth took her arm, and led her into the spare bedroom, which was on the same landing as the drawing-room.

"I'll send for Frances," he said again; "and I'll get you some wine, Ruth, or something?"

But she shook her head.

"I would rather be alone," she said, and so the Colonel left her; and when he was gone Ruth sank down on her knees, with clasped hands, her mind absolutely torn with conflicting feelings.

If he were to die she would be free, would be happy—but no, no, she must not wish him to die—should she pray that he might live? She tried to frame the words, but her lips faltered and refused their utterance. She could not say "Oh! God, spare him," because she knew it would be a false prayer, praying for what she did not wish! And yet it was so terrible, this sudden summons; and he had been so well and full of strength.

And it hung on a balance now, she knew; a moment might turn the scale, and the mysterious breath of life go forth from the maimed body of the man lying upstairs close to the portals "we call death."

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CHAPTER XXIX.

A HEART STRUGGLE.

ABOUT an hour and a half later, Colonel Kenyon and Frances arrived at 47 High-street, for Seaforth had ridden out to Sudley to tell them of the accident, and to ask them, by Colonel Forth's wish, to come immediately to Ruth.

She heard them arrive as she sat pale, cold, and silent, not daring to indulge in hopes which only could be realized by death. But Frances had no such scruples. She ran upstairs to the room where Ruth was, and caught her in her arms and kissed her.

"It is dreadful, isn't it?" said Ruth in a half-whisper.

"I won't pretend what I do not feel," answered Frances; "I always really hated him, and," she added, sinking her voice, "if he dies we shall be safe; we shall have nothing more to fear."

"Still——"

"My dear, don't look shocked; I confess candidly I shall be glad to hear his bitter tongue is dumb."

"Oh! Frances, but think of his sufferings!"

"He made us suffer enough," said Frances, with a darkling brow; "but Ruth, how cold you are. I shall ring for some tea."

"Is father here still?"

"Yes, and Hugh, and Seaforth. Did you know Seaforth rode to Sudley to tell us? He is a nice fellow, and he seemed to feel so much for you; I fancy, Ruth, he cares very much for you still."

"Hush, don't talk of such things when——"

"Very well, my dear; they say Audley may pull through, you know, but the chances are against it."

Ruth made no answer; she drank some tea when it came, and sat listening to Frances' lively words, but without responding. This crisis in her fate seemed to her too solemn for words, so tragic in its results whichever way the balance swung, that she could not speak of its probabilities.

In a little while Colonel Forth rapped at the room door, and came in to tell his daughters that the servants were inquiring whether dinner should be served at the usual time. Ruth shuddered, but Frances answered :—

"Of course ; Hugh and I are going to stay on with Ruth until we see how it turns out with Audley, and I for one do not mean to starve. Tell them to have dinner ready at the usual time, and perhaps Seaforth will stay."

"Oh, no, no," said Ruth, quickly, "don't ask him, father—you and Hugh are different."

"I agree with you, Ruth ; Seaforth is a civil young fellow, but on an occasion like this, only the family ought to be present, when we cannot tell what may happen any minute," replied the Colonel ; and he nodded to his daughters and went away.

And when the dinner hour came, Ruth refused to go downstairs, and a tray was therefore sent up to her by Frances, but she left the food untouched. Major Audley was lying in the front bedroom over the drawing-room, and there was another bedroom on this flat also, which Ruth used as a dressing-room. If Frances and Colonel Kenyon were going to stay, they would need the room Ruth was in, next the drawing-room, she thought ; therefore she went noiselessly up the staircase to the higher landing, pausing a moment or two outside the door of the room where Audley lay so desperately hurt.

As she did this a moan of bitter pain from within fell on her ears. The poor girl clasped her hands and listened, and all the womanliness of her nature thrilled with pity. She hesitated, then softly turned the handle of the door and went in. Dr. Murray was sitting near the bed and a nurse was in the room also. But Ruth saw nothing but the bandaged head and face tossing on the pillows. She walked up to the bed, and Audley, who was rallying from the first shock, and whose sight was uninjured, evidently recognised her.

A splinter had struck the lower part of his face and terribly torn one cheek and the chin ; but the dangerous part of his injuries were in the right leg, which was so shattered that the doctors at once decided on amputation, and were only waiting until his strength returned sufficiently to bear the operation.

As Ruth bent over the bed, Dr. Murray rose and turned

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away, and Ruth took Audley's hand gently in her own, and spoke to him.

"I fear you are suffering very much?" she said, in a voice full of pity.

He made no answer. He looked at her, and understood from the expression of her face that her heart was full of sympathy for his agony.

"May I stay with you?" she asked.

He had not spoken since the accident, and he did not speak now, but he slightly moved his head to express he wished her to remain.

"I will not leave you, then," she said, and she smoothed his pillows, and wetted his lips with some restorative the doctor handed to her.

"Major Audley has pulled himself together wonderfully," said Dr. Murray, who was a good-natured, pleasant-looking young man. "You are all right now, Major," he added, cheerfully. "Mrs. Audley here will make a famous nurse, I am sure."

Again Audley's eyes rested on the pale fair face of his young wife, and he muttered something, but the bandages on the jaws made his words very indistinct.

"What is it?" she asked, bending closer to him.

"Do—you—really wish to stay—with me?" at last she made out.

"Yes, indeed yes," she said earnestly; and then for a moment she turned away her head. "I will come back in a minute," she added, and she left the room and went into the bedroom next door, and flinging herself on her knees, now did pray, earnestly and humbly, to be delivered from temptation.

"Let me do what I can do, what I ought to do—let me make him live if I can."

She rose from her knees with the determination strong in her heart to do her best to nurse the man back to health whose life was the bitter burden of her own. But the sight of his agony, the knowledge that perhaps her presence by his bed might be some comfort to him, made her forget at the time all the sufferings he had caused her.

And she went back to him, and tended him as carefully as a loving woman might have done. She sat up with him during this first night, and tried to soothe the cruel pain that racked his body with almost intolerable anguish,

And she found some comfort in the thought that she was doing her duty. It was better than sitting waiting, stifling back the hope that he might die. And Audley looked at her once or twice almost gratefully. Perhaps he remembered in these grim hours the cruel wrong he had done her.

He tried to speak to her once, and his words showed some thought for her.

"You had better lie down," she made out in those husky accents. But Ruth sat by him all through the night and in the early dawn the nurse took her place and she lay down for a few hours.

The next day his leg was amputated, and the doctors would not allow her to be present in his room, nor to go in immediately afterwards. She sat in the dining-room during the operation, holding Frances' hand, and Colonel Kenyon stayed with them. There were three doctors upstairs, and while they were there, Seaforth came to inquire after Audley, and Colonel Kenyon went into the hall to speak to him, and after a few words brought him into the dining-room beside the sisters.

He silently clasped Ruth's cold hand and then spoke to Frances, though his eyes lingered on the pale worn face which always was attractive to him.

"She looks very tired, does she not?" said Frances, noting Seaforth's expression. "She sat up all last night with Major Audley, and it is terribly trying."

"But any woman would have done the same, Frances," said Ruth quickly, and with a sudden blush.

"I don't know that, my dear; many women under the circumstances would not have gone near him."

Seaforth looked quickly from one to the other; he was wondering what Frances meant.

"I think you should try to get some rest now," he said.

"I would—if it was over," answered Ruth with a little shiver; "but it is so dreadful to think of such pain."

"I do not suppose he will suffer much; they were going to give him chloroform, Murray said," replied Seaforth.

He only stayed a few minutes longer, but Ruth could not help thinking of him as she sat there waiting to hear whether her husband had survived the operation or not.

She tried not to do this; to concentrate her thoughts on Audley's sufferings, but in vain. There had been the old sweet look of kindness and sympathy in Seaforth's eyes as

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he had spoken to her, and she thought he almost understood the struggle going on in her own heart.

It seemed hours and hours to the sisters before they heard two of the doctors descending the staircase, and a few moments later Dr. Murray rapped at the dining-room door and came in.

"I thought I would come and tell you," he said, "that Major Audley has borne the operation even better than we expected, and we trust now that he will ultimately recover."

Neither Frances nor Ruth spoke; but Colonel Kenyon warmly expressed his pleasure at the news.

"Poor fellow, I earnestly hope so," he said; "he has such a splendid physique he ought to pull through."

"We hope he will now," answered Murray, "but I am going back to him, and you will excuse me, I am sure, Mrs. Audley, but we all agree it would be best for you not to see him to-day."

"Very well," said Ruth, quietly; and she did not.

But in spite of Dr. Murray's opinion, for the next few days Audley's life hung on a thread. "He might sink any moment," was whispered through the anxious household, was told at the Fort, and listened to by Kenard Seaforth with a pale face and suppressed excitement. Perhaps he, too, against his higher instincts had clung to an unspoken hope. If Audley were to die, Ruth would be free again; free to tell him what force had been brought upon her to compel her to act against what she felt almost sure were the feelings of her heart.

"Yet it was brutal," he told himself, "to wish the poor fellow dead." So restless did he feel that he took long walks by the sea-coast, watching the green rolling water break up against the brown sea-walls or vaguely fixing his eyes on the white gulls skimming on the waves. But he could not forget for a moment the human soul whose summons might come "in the twinkling of an eye." He might be dead now, he thought over and over again; and he used to call at the house, when he returned from these expeditions, to inquire for Major Audley, and he thus often saw Frances and Colonel Kenyon, and occasionally Ruth, and these chance meetings were like faint gleams of sunshine to her amid the black winter of her life.

For though Audley was no coward, he was a most

impatient and exacting invalid. It enraged him to think that he lay there a cripple for life, and greatly disfigured. And he was jealous and angry if Ruth were ever absent from his bedside. She was, in truth, worn out with waiting on him, and the uncertainty of his recovery or non-recovery was very trying to her poor weak human heart.

But she did her duty bravely and well, and the doctors, perhaps, thought that what made the young wife's face so pale was the fear of losing her husband. They insisted on her leaving him sometimes on account of her own health, and one day when she went downstairs to lunch, to her surprise she found Sir Arthur Beaton talking to Frances, who still remained with her.

He rose and shook her hand very kindly.

"I am so sorry for all your trouble, Mrs. Audley," he said, "but I hear Major Audley is going on well."

"He has been better these last two days," answered Ruth; "when did you return?"

"Last night, and I came here at this unreasonable hour to inquire for Major Audley," and he cast down his dark, handsome, grey eyes, as he spoke.

He, in truth, had seen Frances' beautiful face smiling at him through the dining-room window, and had been unable to resist going to speak to her. She had known from Seaforth he was expected back at the Fort, and she had been watching for him, and told him this in her coquettish way.

"I am so pleased to see you," she said. "We have had the most dreadful time here, but of course I could not leave poor Ruth."

"It was very good of you to stay," he answered.

"You must look in sometimes, to help to enliven me," smiled Frances. "I was watching at the window, hoping to see you pass."

He looked eagerly up in her face.

"Do you really care to see me again?" he asked, in a low voice.

"I really do," she answered. "Don't you know that very well?"

He did not speak, but Frances knew by the glad light in his eyes that her foolish words had made him very happy, and when Ruth went downstairs she found these two laughing and talking together, both looking well pleased.

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"I have asked Sir Arthur to stay and have lunch with us, Ruth," said Frances; "it seems so funny to call him Sir Arthur, doesn't it—the old Arthur Beaton?"

"Well, I am the old Arthur Beaton still," he answered, with some meaning in his words.

"Yet it is a great change," said Ruth.

"A man's circumstances do not change his feelings, Mrs. Audley."

"But I think they very often do," answered Ruth; "we are as circumstances make us," and she cast down her eyes and sighed ever so softly, lest Frances should hear that faint reproach.

"Of course we are as circumstances make us," said Frances, energetically. "But don't let us talk of it—of 'what might have been;'" and she rose restlessly and went to the window, and Beaton's eyes followed her.

He stayed and had luncheon with them, and after that meal was over, still lingered.

"I promised to call on our dearly beloved parent this afternoon," presently said Frances; "will you walk up with me to the little house, Mr.—oh! I forget," and she smiled, "Sir Arthur?"

"I shall be too pleased," he answered.

And after a little while they went out together, and Ruth watching them felt a vague uneasiness steal into her heart.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE COLONEL'S WIDOW.

AFTER this Sir Arthur used to come very often to 47 High Street, and Colonel Kenyon in his kindly fashion was always glad to welcome him there. He used to ask Seaforth and Beaton over to Sudley also, for a day's sport occasionally, and the two young men were on very friendly terms with him. But somehow Colonel Forth did not quite like this intimacy, and used to receive Sir Arthur very sourly when they chanced to meet.

The Colonel's own affairs, however, occupied his mind a good deal about this time, for in spite of his protestations to the contrary, the idea of a second marriage was beginning to be entertained by him.

This was perhaps but natural, for ever since the day of the birthday party at Sudley, Mrs. Dixon, "the well-endowed" widow, had pursued him with the utmost determination. What she saw in him, no one could tell! A surly cross-grained man at best, no doubt he was, yet here was a good-looking middle-aged woman, said to have a large fortune, seemingly doing her utmost to attract his admiration; "and I suppose she must mean something by it," often grimly reflected Colonel Forth.

In a small place like Headfort it is of course very easy to meet any one if you wish to do so. If the Colonel strolled down the long straggling High Street, he was almost sure to encounter the lively widow at some part of it. She was a good-looking woman; past her early beauty certainly, but well preserved, and with a ready boastful tongue. She had an easy way of making the most of things, and out of a small matter would create a very substantial one. She had travelled a little, but to listen to her conversation you would have supposed that few visitable portions of our globe had been untrampled by her feet, and she flattered Colonel Forth without stint, and made the terrible accident at the Fort fit her purpose so well, that he actually thought she was really intensely interested in the recovery of his son-in-law; "for I feel so much for you all," she used to tell him, fixing her still bright eyes on his red, uncomely face.

And he began to believe that she did. At first he thought "the woman's a humbug; what does she care?" but after awhile felt secretly pleased when he met her, and did not dislike to listen to her cajoling words.

To the amusement of Frances, one day she encountered these two walking together in a country lane. True, this was quite an accidental walk on the part of the Colonel, who had taken too many brandies and sodas the night before, and intended to get rid of his headache by exercise. But the wily widow had seen him start, and planned to meet him as he was returning, and did meet him, though she affected to be extremely surprised by doing so.

"Colonel Forth!" she exclaimed, as she held out her hand, "fancy meeting *you* in this lonely spot!"

"Got a headache; trying to walk it off," said the Colonel, somewhat embarrassed.

"Well, it's a lovely day," said Mrs. Dixon, looking con-

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"Don't like 'em," answered the practical Colonel. "Damp, unwholesome, that kind of thing."

"True," said the complacent widow, "they say it is not a very healthy time of year, but your air here is so splendid it seems to give one new life, and everyone looks so well at Headfort," and she glanced up at Colonel Forth's red visage.

"Yes, I think it's pretty healthy."

"And how is your poor invalid to-day, and your sweet daughter?"

"Oh, Audley's getting on all right now, I expect; of course it was a very near shave, and a confounded piece of ill-luck, as he will have to leave the service."

"Terribly sad; such a trial to you all; and so soon after his marriage with that beautiful creature, too! Ah! we little thought that the day when we first met, Colonel Forth, when we were enjoying ourselves so much, that such a misfortune was creeping so near. But we never know."

"Very well we don't."

"That is so, indeed; if we knew, our bright hours might be clouded for us, we should be always watching for the storm."

"No good in doing that."

"There is certainly none; but are you returning to the village? I, too, was just thinking of turning, as I only came out for a little stroll; in which case it will be charming to have such delightful company on my way back."

The Colonel saw no help for it. He rather liked Mrs. Dixon, but he certainly did not like to be seen walking with her. He felt as if he were committing himself as he strode by her side, and he grew more reserved in his manner; defended himself, as it were, like people mentally button up their pockets when they are afraid they are going to be asked to open them.

Mrs. Dixon was quite acute enough to notice this, but one of her mottoes in life was only "to see what she chose." In vain, therefore, the Colonel gave short answers, and walked with averted head. The widow smiled serenely, and told tales of her travels, and asked Colonel Forth about India, telling him it was the dream of her life to feast her eyes on its gorgeous pictures.

"Wait till you try it," said the Colonel; "baked alive."

"Of course, it is hot."

"Hot! that is not the word; an oven with the door shut more like it."

"Still——"

At this moment, to the Colonel's utter consternation, his daughter, Frances, riding between Colonel Kenyon and Sir Arthur Beaton, was to be seen approaching, and could the poor man have jumped over the hedge and escaped, he would gladly have done so, knowing well Frances' sarcastic tongue.

But there was no help for it. They had seen him as well as he had seen them, and there was an amused smile on all their faces when they met, and pulled up their horses to greet the Colonel.

"Good morning, Forth," said Colonel Kenyon.

"Been for a long walk?" smiled Frances.

"Oh, no; just a short way; got a beastly headache," answered the Colonel, who was furious at his daughter's expression and tone.

"Do you often take country walks?" asked Frances, that amused smile still rippling over her face, now addressing Mrs. Dixon.

"Oh! I love them; and as I've been telling the Colonel here, whom I chanced to meet, this season is to me so beautiful; the fading leaves, the general air of—well, passing away, you know," added Mrs. Dixon, whose metaphors had failed her.

"I like the spring," said Frances, and her hazel eyes gave one glance at Beaton's handsome face; "I love to look forward, not back."

"Well, it's too chill to stand," said Colonel Kenyon; "good-day, Forth; good-morning, Mrs. Dixon;" and he took off his hat and rode on, followed by Frances and Beaton, leaving his old friend with rage in his heart, for Colonel Forth saw very well that his daughter was secretly laughing at him.

"Do you think I am going to have a step-mother, Hugh?" she said, gaily, to her husband.

"It looks uncommonly like it; your father's not a ladies' man in general, you know."

"You don't really think so! A flattering old wretch like that."

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"My dear, she's a good-looking woman, and I often think how lonely Forth must be without you and Ruth."

"He was always grumbling," began Frances, and then she checked herself.

"He's a professional grumbler," said Colonel Kenyon good-naturedly.

In the meanwhile the two of whom they were talking were walking on together, both feeling certainly not at their ease. Mrs. Dixon was annoyed at having met Mrs. Kenyon, as she shrewdly guessed Colonel Forth's daughters would not be pleased if he were to marry again; and Colonel Forth hated to "make a fool" of himself, as he expressed it, and considered that at the present moment he had done so.

"They seem very happy," said Mrs. Dixon, speaking of the Kenyons; "but then she is so beautiful no wonder he adores her—absolutely adores her, I believe."

"She has everything to make her happy," answered the Colonel briefly.

"Yes, indeed," and the widow cast down her eyes, "the love of a brave and distinguished man. Ah!" she added, glancing up again; "you soldiers have it all your own way with us poor women! But then it should be so; you risk your lives for us, and for your country; you go through hardships, dangers, and no wonder we smile on you when you return;" and Mrs. Dixon smiled.

"It's a hard enough life, and the absurd regulations spoil the service; a fellow has to retire nowadays in the very prime of his life; just look at *me*!"

"In the very prime, indeed!" softly echoed Mrs. Dixon, favorably regarding the Colonel's stalwart person.

"Here I am, with my time hanging on my hands," continued Forth, who had got on one of his pet grievances; "too old to start any new profession, too young to sit down doing nothing."

"And you must be very lonely now," said Mrs. Dixon in her sweetest tones.

This alarmed the Colonel.

"Oh, no," he said, "I get along pretty well, with the girls being so near, and all that. Well, good morning, Mrs. Dixon; that is your nearest road to the Vicarage, and I'm going into the billiard-room for an hour;" and he took off his hat, and Mrs. Dixon was compelled to take the rest of her walk alone.

Nevertheless, she had not, perhaps, quite wasted her time. True, Colonel Forth was as wary as an old fox; but still, as he walked on, he could not help thinking "what a good-looking woman she was of her age, and agreeable, too; none of Frances' snappish, unpleasant ways about her."

And this favorable opinion was confirmed a few days later, when he dined at the Vicarage to meet Mrs. Dixon. This lady seemed bent on charming him, and as he sat next her he began to think after all "if she really has the money Appleby talks about, why should I not marry her, as she seems to have taken such a fancy to me?"

"No accounting for these things," thought the Colonel, looking at himself on his return home in the mirror over the dining-room mantelpiece, with satisfaction in his small bloodshot eyes. "She is a sensible woman, very good-looking too; and if she has a good income—well, a fellow might do worse. I must sound Appleby; of course, unless the money's really there, it would be absurd to think of such a thing."

And shortly afterwards he took an opportunity of "sounding" the Vicar, who was quite ready to give him all the information in his power.

"She seems a nice sort of woman, that friend of yours, Mrs. Dixon, I think," began the Colonel, who joined Mr. Appleby in High Street, for the purpose of making his proposed inquiries.

"Charming—I call her charming," answered the Vicar, "with all the vivacity of youth, combined with the more sober attractions of advanced years. Yes, I consider Mrs. Dixon a woman whom any man might be proud to win; and, ah! my dear friend," he added, looking round, smilingly, at the Colonel's face, "it seems to me you have made a serious impression in that quarter."

"Oh, nonsense, folly."

"Quite true, I assure you; it will be betraying a fair lady's confidence were I to tell you all the pretty things she says of you; in fact, I believe you have only to ask the momentous question to receive a favorable answer."

"Oh, that's all folly."

"Well, now, between you and me, I'll give you a hint of what she thinks of you. After you left our house the other night we, naturally, spoke of you and your two

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lovely daughters, and Mrs. Dixon sighed ; yes, my friend, positively sighed ! ' He is a very fine man,' she remarked ; and when a widow says that and *sighs*—mark my words, Colonel—it means something ; and then she has such a fine fortune."

" Really ? " asked the Colonel, with strong interest.

" Most certainly ; her husband left her, I believe, over twenty thousand pounds."

" That's a pretty round sum. What was he ? "

" On the Stock Exchange ; yes, Mr. Dixon was a most worthy man, and she was an exemplary wife to him during his lifetime, and now quite naturally feels a little lonely in the world, and, I believe, would not be averse to take a second partner, and I am sure looks on you with very favorable eyes."

These words made a deep impression on Colonel Forth's heart. Twenty thousand pounds ! He had under four hundred a year, and had barely been able to get along when the girls were at home. Now certainly he had enough for all his modest requirements ; but money is always welcome, and he thought and thought of what he could do if Mrs. Dixon's substantial income were added to his own.

But was all this really true ? he asked himself. He knew the report of money gathers like a snowball as it goes along, and he was afraid to commit himself on the mere word of the Vicar. At last he made up his mind he would run up to town, and secretly have a look at the will of the late Mr. Dixon at Somerset House. He was half ashamed to act thus, it must be conceded. He had heard of men doing so before, and knew an instance of a handsome girl throwing a gunner over because she found out he had done the very same thing. But still marriage was such a serious step, that the Colonel felt it would be madness to take such a leap in the dark. No, he would find out all about it, and he actually did this, and satisfied himself with his own eyes that the late Thomas Dixon, stock broker, residing during his lifetime at Bolton Gardens, had left his wife the substantial sum of twenty thousand pounds absolutely. There was no mention of children in this document, therefore the Colonel naturally concluded there were none, but several bequests to relations and friends. But there it was in black and white, *twenty*

thousand pounds, and as he travelled back to Headfort he felt almost as if he were already the happy possessor of this sum.

He had, of course, said nothing either to Frances or Ruth of his intentions. No, he determined he would keep it all quiet until everything was settled ; but the question now was, how and where should he propose to the lady ?

Mrs. Dixon had first come to Headfort as the guest of the Vicar, but she had since taken lodgings in the village, but Colonel Forth had never entered them. Should he call, he asked himself. Fate, however, was propitious to him, for the day after he got back to Headfort, he met Mrs. Dixon, close to her own rooms, and after a little conversation she invited him in.

As the Colonel ascended the narrow staircase behind her he felt the moment had come. It certainly crossed his mind, as he stumbled over a hole in the stair-carpet, that these were shabby rooms for a lady of fortune to reside in. Still there was no mistake ; he had seen the will, and money meant money's worth, and the Colonel was prepared to immolate himself at its shrine.

"You have been to town, then?" smiled Mrs. Dixon as she waved him to a chair.

"Yes, some business with the War Office, about the old regiment," replied the Colonel, without the slightest regard to facts.

"In my poor husband's time I had a beautiful town house, and a sweet place by the river also, but what is the good of a single woman keeping up all this solitary state?"

"You must marry again," replied Colonel Forth, clearing his throat.

"It is certainly very lonely," sighed Mrs. Dixon.

"I am very lonely, too," said the wooer, after a moment's hesitation.

"Ah, but you men have so much more to occupy you than we poor women."

"Oh, I don't know."

"Yes, your clubs, your newspapers, your cigars!" said Mrs. Dixon, playfully.

"A man wants more than these though," answered Colonel Forth, about to take the fatal plunge.

"And what is more?" asked Mrs. Dixon, casting down her eyes.

"Well, a wife for one thing, eh?"

"A devoted wife is certainly something."

"A great deal to my mind. Come, Mrs. Dixon," went on the Colonel valiantly, rising and standing before her, "I'm a man of few words, you know; but if you are willing to cast in your lot with mine, well I'm agreeable," and he held out his hand.

"Do you really mean this?" said Mrs. Dixon, putting her hand into his.

"Of course, I really mean it. There! Will you marry me. That's plain enough, isn't it?"

"And you really care for me? Care for myself alone?"

"Certainly; what else do you suppose I want to marry you for?"

"Then—then I am very happy," murmured Mrs. Dixon; and the Colonel felt it behoved him to bend down and kiss her, and thus the compact was sealed.

"Shall our engagement be a long one?" she asked modestly, before he quitted her apartments.

"Don't see any good in waiting," he answered, and as she also saw no reason for delay, they agreed to be married in a month.

But when Colonel Forth returned to his own house he felt restless and uncomfortable. Mrs. Dixon had accepted him, had declared herself to be happy in his affections; but she had not said a single word about her fortune, and money had never been mentioned between them.

"Still, there can be no doubt," he reflected uneasily; and he also reflected that a most unpleasant business lay before him, as he would be forced to tell his daughters of his engagement.

He screwed up his courage two days later to go over to Sudley to tell Frances and Colonel Kenyon, as Mrs. Dixon had expressed a strong wish that he should do so.

"You see, Colonel," she had said, "it places me in a false position as it were, your coming here without either my friends or your children knowing we are to be married;" and the Colonel saw there was good sense in her words. So he went to Sudley as Frances and her husband had now returned there. He found his old friend out, but his beautiful daughter was sitting charmingly dressed in her drawing-room, and did not look very well pleased when her father walked in.

"There is nothing the matter, is there?" she said, quickly.
 "Audley is not worse?"

"Oh, no; he's going on all right, I believe," answered Colonel Forth, who was feeling far from happy. "So Kenyon's out, is he?"

"Yes, he's out shooting."

"Well, I've got a bit of news for you, that's the truth," said the Colonel with a great effort, and with a sort of spasmodic smile; "I suppose you'll think I am making a fool of myself, but I am going to be married again."

"Not Mrs. Dixon surely?" asked Frances sharply.

"Why not Mrs. Dixon? She's a good-looking woman with a good fortune."

"I don't believe much in her fortune; in fact I don't believe in it at all. If she were rich she would not live as she does; it's all nonsense."

"Oh, but it's not; I know it is not."

"How can you know? You don't surely believe all the folly Mr. Appleby talks?"

"I believe in my own eyes," answered Colonel Forth hotly, and thrown off his guard by Frances' persistency; "I tell you I've seen the will—her late husband's will, and he left her twenty thousand pounds!"

Frances listened, looked at her father, and then laughed aloud.

"Well," she said scoffingly, "you were quite right; if I had been going to marry Mrs. Dixon I should have seen the will first, too!"

CHAPTER XXXI.

A TAME CAT.

COLONEL FORTH was very angry after his interview with Frances; angry both with himself and his daughter that he should have been led on to tell that he had gone secretly to examine the late Mr. Dixon's will. He would not remain to dinner at Sudley, nor to see his old friend Kenyon.

"No, thank you," he said curtly, when his daughter asked him to do so; "but perhaps you will be good enough

not to tell everyone that I know anything about Mrs. Dixon's money? No one has any business with it, and I do not choose to have it talked about."

Again Frances laughed, and her mirth made the Colonel feel very sore.

"Have you told Ruth?" she asked.

"No, you can tell her if you like; and now good-day to you," and with a very cold handshake he went away, leaving Frances highly amused.

And presently her husband and Sir Arthur Beaton came into the drawing-room, for Sir Arthur was at Sudley for a day's pheasant shooting, and Frances told them the news.

"Well," said Colonel Kenyon, smiling, "why do you laugh? I dare say the widow is a very charming woman."

"Very," answered Frances; "and she has twenty thousand pounds, which adds no doubt materially to her charms."

"Twenty thousand pounds!" repeated the Colonel, surprised; "then my old friend has done very well for himself, and I am heartily glad."

"Looks as if she knew what she was about, too," said Sir Arthur.

"I don't think *she does*," said Frances, with such marked emphasis that both the men laughed, for Colonel Forth's peculiarities were well known.

At this moment a servant came into the room, and told Colonel Kenyon that one of his tenants wished to speak to him, and thus Beaton and Frances were left alone. They looked at each other and smiled, and Beaton, who was standing by the fireplace, crossed over to Frances' tea-table, carrying his tea-cup with him.

"May I have another cup?" he said.

"If you are very good," she answered.

"Will you tell me how to be?"

He sat down on the couch beside her as he spoke, and Frances looked at him, smiling still.

"You must talk no nonsense," she said.

"But you have stolen away all my sense."

"I must lend you some of mine, then; but really Sir Arthur——"

"Please call me Arthur."

"Really, Arthur, then, I want you to be good; not to

say silly things—though I shall not ask you not to look them.”

“You mean I have to be a sort of tame cat, I suppose.”

“Yes, a dear good-tempered little tabbie,” laughed Frances.

“Then I won’t be!” said Sir Arthur, starting to his feet. “I gave you fair warning; I am not always going to be made a fool of.”

“You stupid boy, sit down; who is making a fool of you? Instead of being a nice little tame cat, I declare you are like a great handsome mastiff, ready to growl whenever I speak to you.”

“You have cost me enough already, Frances.”

He spoke half-bitterly, half-tenderly; but the next moment he sat down again by her side, and watched her pour out the tea he had asked her for, and then bent down and kissed the white slender hand nearest to him.

“Am I forgiven?” he said. “You should forgive me for loving you too well.”

She turned round and looked at him again, but she was not smiling now.

“I always forgive you,” she said, in a low tone, “when I look at *that*,” and she lightly touched the scar on his cheek.

He had told her all about it; of all the mad passion and jealousy which had racked his heart when he had learned from her own letter that she was about to marry Colonel Kenyon, and how he had determined to end a life that his deep love for her had made unendurable. And Frances had listened, not displeased. She had blamed him, we may be sure, but her voice was very soft and tender as she had done so.

“If I had only known you cared for me so much,” she had said with downcast eyes.

“You knew—you must have known,” he had answered impetuously.

“There are many kinds of love, Arthur. How was I to know that yours was *true*?”

These words had intoxicated the young man’s heart when he listened to them, but Frances did not always talk to him in this strain. Her moods were very variable, and one day she sighed, and another smiled. But her old power over Arthur Beaton grew and grew, and people be-

gan to talk of these two, and to speculate how Sir Arthur's infatuation would end. Audley, lying ill upstairs, heard nothing of this, but Beaton often went to see him, and thus was thrown into greater intimacy with the two sisters. Almost every day he called at 47 High Street, and his visits helped to pass the time for the sick man, and also gave some relief to Ruth, who used to leave the room when he was there.

And sometimes she saw Seaforth, but he did not call so often as Beaton. He had a kind of guilty feeling in his heart, which made him feel he was not quite sincere when he expressed pleasure at Audley's improvement. But this was very slow. Audley fretted and fumed over his wrecked career, and this impatience threw him back, and undoubtedly retarded his recovery.

"To be a miserable cripple all one's days ; it's enough to drive a man mad," he once told Beaton.

"Come, you have a great deal to live for still, my dear fellow," he had answered.

"Not I," said Audley, gloomily ; and he lay silent for a few minutes, and spoke very little afterwards while Beaton remained.

But he liked Beaton, and perhaps the knowledge that he had saved the rash young man's life by his promptitude and energy helped to fan this feeling. And Beaton felt so intensely sorry for him, and showed this in that warm impetuous way of his by a hundred kindnesses. Anything he thought would help to cheer or amuse Audley he always sent for, and was thus constantly going to High Street, knowing also that there he was almost sure at some time of the day or other to meet Frances Kenyon.

From the Fort he could see her carriage drive up to the door, and Ruth began to notice how often her visits and his happened at the same time. Beaton was so kind, she did not like to say anything against him to Frances, but she began to think it was a pity Frances allowed him to be so constantly with her.

"He is a nice fellow," she said one day, "but take care you do not make him unhappy, Frances."

"My dear," answered Frances, smiling, "the unhappiness of men is of a very temporary nature, and they soon console themselves with the next pretty face they meet."

"Still, he used to admire you so much."

"I hope he still admires me ; I should be very much disappointed if he didn't," laughed Frances.

"Oh, but I mean seriously, you know."

Again Frances laughed, and then began talking of something else, for she never said anything to Ruth of Beaton's ardent admiration, and always spoke of him half-jestingly. Yet she had fixed to meet him when she went to tell Ruth of their father's engagement to Mrs. Dixon, just as she had fixed to meet him many times before.

"I shall carry the news to Ruth to-morrow," she said, as she parted with him ; "perhaps I shall see you."

"Yes," he answered, briefly, for there were times when he struggled with this master-feeling in his heart, when he told himself it was a mean thing to accept Colonel Kenyon's hospitality, and try all the time to win the affections of his wife. But Frances held him very securely in her toils, and knew how to wile him back when his conscience or sense of honor gave him a passing pang.

And he watched for her next day from the windows of the Fort, and saw her drive up to Ruth's house without her husband, and his heart felt glad. He never was quite happy in Colonel Kenyon's presence, and did not care to look often in the honest kindly eyes of the man he felt he was deceiving. There was about this young man, indeed, many high and noble instincts, all of which, unhappily, were over-shadowed by the love which Frances was for ever fanning in his heart.

And while he was waiting until he thought he could with decency follow her to Ruth's, Frances was telling the news of their father's engagement, to which Ruth was listening with downcast eyes and a troubled heart.

For she always secretly hoped some day to return to her father's house. She had done her duty faithfully to Audley since the dreadful accident which had so nearly destroyed her life, but there had been no change in her feelings towards him, except that she had felt the deepest pity for the strong man struck down in his prime. And Audley, lying there sick and suffering, knew that it was not love which made her touch so gentle, and her eyes so sad. She was as far away from him as ever, while she bent over his bed, and tried to soothe his irritability and pain. It rose on his lips sometimes to bid her go and leave him, and not act a part she did not feel ; but he

never absolutely said this. Perhaps he hoped against hope that some day she might learn to care for him, for he knew that in spite of everything he loved her still.

At least he felt for her that selfish jealous emotion which some men dignify by that name. And this even grew stronger when he had nothing else to divert his mind—no flatteries from Lady Hastings; no smiles from women who are ever ready to let every good-looking man see that they admire them. Audley had nothing now to console his vanity, nor comfort his heart. He used to lie watching Ruth moving about the room—a slender girlish figure—and his thoughts sometimes were very bitter ones.

He could not accuse her of not being attentive to him, for, unless when her sister called, she rarely left him; but still he had an uneasy jealousy which never quitted him. How did he know what was going on downstairs, he told himself. The servants used to come up and tell Ruth Mrs. Kenyon was below, and she would leave him for half an hour or so. He asked Beaton this question quite suddenly one day, when the young man was sitting beside him, doing his best to make the time seem less heavy.

"Is Seaforth downstairs?" he said; and Beaton, without suspicion of his motive, replied truthfully that he was not.

"I have not seen him for a day or two," continued Audley, ashamed of his query; "and that made me ask."

Seaforth got his company during these days, and was very restless and ill at ease. He was sure now that Ruth had not changed to him, and that their separation had been caused by something he could not understand. A feeling of delicacy prevented his going often to High Street, because he knew Ruth was constantly in attendance on the suffering man whose name she bore. He heard this from Dr. Murray, and he heard also of Ruth's gentleness, patience, and unselfishness.

"Yet," said the young Scotch doctor one day, who was shrewd, "I don't believe she really cares for the poor fellow a bit. I notice she scarcely ever looks at him, though he watches her; but women are queer beings."

"Very," answered Seaforth moodily, and he turned away. His light-heartedness was indeed all gone, though something of his former open and trustful expression had stolen back to his eyes since he had again met Ruth, and seen on her face the shadow of an unspoken pain.

Beaton had told him that Audley had asked about him, and said he had not seen him for some days ; and Seaforth had, therefore, decided to call on the very afternoon on which Frances had gone to tell Ruth of Colonel Forth's proposed marriage.

Frances went into all the (to her) amusing details of their father expending his shilling or eighteen pence at Somerset House, in his researches to assure himself of the reality of the widow's money.

"It was awfully mean !" said Ruth, indignantly.

"Awfully prudent, my dear, you mean," laughed Frances.

"I think he is very silly to marry at all, with his temper, and at his age ; but I should have thought him much sillier if he had not made sure of the money before he committed himself. But it is a bore for *us* ; fancy having that vulgar, boasting woman for a step-mother."

"I am very sorry."

"Oh, well you know we can as good as cut her if we like. Still it's a bore ; she's so pushing and flattering ; she will be bad to keep in the background."

A ring came to the house door bell at this moment, and Frances rose and looked out of the window.

"It is our friend, Sir Arthur," she said, lightly, and a few moments later Sir Arthur was ushered into the dining-room, where all visitors were now received, for the doctors thought the murmur of voices in the drawing-room might chance to reach Major Audley's ears, who was lying in the room above.

"Well, Ruth is furious about the step-mother," said Frances, as she shook hands with Beaton.

"I am sure she is never furious about anything," he answered, smiling.

"I don't like it at all, at least," said Ruth.

"No ? She is rather a gushing sort of person, isn't she ? But the Colonel may keep her well in hand."

"That sort of woman is not so easy to keep in hand, as you call it," said Frances, archly, "as you will find, Sir Arthur, when you try."

He looked at her and smiled.

"What a tease you are," he said, and he took up one of her driving gloves as he spoke, which Frances had pulled off and thrown on the dining-room table.

"Who owns this pretty thing ?" he asked, though in truth he knew.

Again the door bell rang, and this time Seaforth was ushered into the dining-room.

"I congratulate you on your promotion," said Frances graciously, for she had not seen him since he had got his company.

He thanked her, and involuntarily looked at Ruth, whose eyelids fell, for she knew of what he was thinking—how they had planned together that when this happened they were to brave fortune, and share together Seaforth's modest income, even if his father refused to continue his allowance.

"Will you go upstairs and see Major Audley, first?" now asked Beaton. "He must not have two visitors together, you know, the doctors say, and as he was asking after you——"

"If I may," answered Seaforth, glancing at Ruth with some embarrassment.

"Oh, yes, he likes to see his friends," she said, without directly looking at Seaforth; "it makes it not so dull, you know, nor the day so long. You will find the nurse there, but she will leave the room when you go in."

Seaforth accordingly left the dining-room and went up to Audley's room and rapped at the door, which the nurse opened.

"Can I see Major Audley?" he asked,

"Ah, Seaforth, is that you?" said Audley from the bed, as he had recognised the voice. "Of course, come in."

So Seaforth went in and shook a hand he would not have touched had he known the secret of Ruth's marriage. But we shake many hands in this world whose grasp we should fling away, could we look straight into that strange and changeful thing, the human heart. And we are forced also by circumstances often to seem on friendly terms when we certainly do not feel so. The two men who were now shaking hands disliked each other, were jealous of each other, and both wished each other far away; and Seaforth had been tempted many a time of late to wish that Audley was out of the world altogether, though, to do him justice, he struggled against this. Yet the conventionalities of society made it necessary for him now to call on his commanding officer, and to express a hope that he was feeling better, and to talk of his injuries in a sympathetic and commiserating manner.

How much do we believe, I wonder, of the civil things said to us; the coin which people exchange so freely in the market-places of the world? Some pleasant words have a genuine ring in them, but a good actor can attune his voice to hide the feelings of his heart. The surest guide, to my mind, whether we can trust our friend or not is in the expression of the eyes—those tell-tale mirrors, where the soul is glassed to those who learn to read aright their dumb but certain language.

Audley did not quite believe in Seaforth's words, and yet at the moment they were fairly sincere. It was a sad sight to see this stalwart soldier lying thus crippled, and it moved to a certain extent the naturally kind heart of the younger man, though Audley's life stood between himself and happiness. They talked together a little while, principally about the regiment, and then Seaforth told Audley that Beaton was waiting below to see him also, and, therefore, he would not stay. It was a relief to them both to part, and yet they were quite civil and even friendly in their manner to each other. But when Seaforth went downstairs, and again entered the dining-room, he found to his surprise that Ruth was alone there.

She was sitting in an easy chair close to the fire, for the day was chill, and she felt weak and weary, but a faint color crept to her pale cheeks as Seaforth went in.

"Frances had a message from Colonel Kenyon for my father," she said, "and so she and Sir Arthur have walked up to the little house to deliver it, but they will only be a few minutes away."

"That's all right, then," answered Seaforth; "I told Major Audley that Beaton was going up to see him presently."

"Is the nurse with him now?" asked Ruth in a low tone, looking straight at the fire.

"Not when I left."

She rose and rang the bell, and, when the servant answered it, she told him to tell the nurse to go to Major Audley.

"He does not like to be left," she said quietly, as she resumed her seat.

Seaforth did not speak; he stood leaning his arm on the mantelpiece, and he was looking at Ruth, noticing how ill and tired she seemed.

"Do you ever go out for a walk or a drive now?" he suddenly asked, abruptly.

Ruth looked up, smiled, and shook her head.

"Not since—I left Sudley—since the day of the accident."

"But do you know it is very bad for you; you should go out—your father should take you—or may I take you some day?"

Again Ruth smiled, and shook her head.

"But why?" asked Seaforth, almost impatiently. "There can be no harm in that, surely?"

Ruth made no answer, and after a restless movement or two, Seaforth crossed the room, went to the window, and stood looking out into the street.

"Do you know," he said after a short silence, "that I am thinking of exchanging, of going out to India?"

"Are you?" answered Ruth, in a low pained tone.

"And I want you to tell me before I go," went on Seaforth, with suppressed agitation, "why you treated me as you did, Ruth. Will you tell me?" he added, and he went back beside her, and again leaned his arm on the mantelpiece.

"I—I cannot do so," said Ruth, in a faltering voice, and she put her hand to her brow.

"But why cannot you tell me?" urged Seaforth. "Did your sister persuade you to throw me over because Audley was the richer man?"

"Do you mean for his money?" asked Ruth, lifting her head and speaking with some indignation. "Ah," she added with a passionate ring in her voice, rising from her seat, "you little know!"

"There must have been some motive. You say you cared for me—I believe you did care; then why did you do it, Ruth?"

She began walking backwards and forwards in the room with irregular footsteps, and after a moment's hesitation, Seaforth went up to her and laid his hand on her arm.

"Do tell me," he said. "If you knew how unhappy, how wild you made me, I am sure you would not keep me longer in suspense. Did you tire of me, and get to like Audley better? I would rather know the truth."

"It was not *that*, at least! No, Kenard, I did not tire



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of you," and she looked straight into his face with her pathetic eyes. "I—I did not change."

"Then why——"

"It is not my secret, and I cannot tell you—this much I will say—I would rather have died!"

"Then you cared for me; you still care for me, Ruth?" And he clasped her hand.

She did not take it away. She stood there with her cold, trembling hand in his, and again she looked up in his face.

"I cared for you," she said, in a broken voice, "and because I cared so much—Kenard, be generous to me now. Don't ask me why I did this—why I wrecked my life—but, believe me, I suffered more than you—oh! far, far more!"

"That could not well be, Ruth," said Seaforth, who also was greatly agitated,

"But it was so, indeed it was; I should not speak thus, I know—I have tried to do right, but, oh! it is very hard!"

He saw her eyes grow dim with tears, and her lips falter, and he knew that she was speaking the truth, and that the love she once had given him she gave him still.

"And—and you must help me," she went on, struggling with her emotion; "it is very hard, I know——"

"Yes, it is very hard."

"I know it is; but because we once hoped for such different lives, once hoped we would be so happy, will you help me to do right, and try to forget what we once were to each other, though it is so difficult? But I am glad I have met you again, Kenard," she went on, more firmly; "though it was such pain at first, still I am glad, for I am sure you know now that I never changed."

"I know; you were forced into this marriage, then, by some cause that you are still forced to keep a secret?"

"Yes," faltered Ruth.

"And you are unhappy, and I am unhappy. Who spoilt our lives, Ruth?"

Before she could reply, a sound of laughter, of ringing, mirthful laughter, stole through the windows into the room, and Ruth knew that Frances was near.

"That is Frances and Sir Arthur," she said, in a low tone.

"I believe that sister of yours was at the bottom of it," answered Seaforth, hotly, as they heard the street door open, and a moment later Frances and Sir Arthur entered the room.

"Ah, Captain Seaforth," she said, "so you've finished your visit to the invalid? Well, Sir Arthur, it's your turn next."

But Seaforth made no reply to her words, and a few minutes afterwards left the house with a pale, set face, and an agitated and restless heart.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE COLONEL'S WOOING.

COLONEL FORTH had not made much love in his life, and he found it very irksome. Mrs. Dixon was by no means a young woman, but her liveliness, and her display of affection, which seemed daily to increase, was really too much for the poor Colonel. He tried, however, to bear it all manfully, and consoled himself when alone with many brandies and sodas, and with the grim reflection that if they were once married she would soon cool, or he need no longer put up with her love-making.

He had a great dislike, and hated also to think that people thought he was making a fool of himself when he appeared with the gushing widow leaning on his arm. And she would lean on it! She made him go to church, where he had not been for years, except to the marriages of his two daughters, and she paraded him on all possible occasions; and the dread of losing the prospective twenty thousand pounds prevented him appearing restive, and alone prevented it.

"I wish it was over," he confided to his old friend Kenyon, who laughed aloud.

"What do you wish over, my dear Forth?" asked the genial Colonel.

"All the fuss and bother, the love-making business," answered Forth with a grim smile. "I suppose women will have it; but why two middle-aged people cannot just go quietly and get married, without all this nonsense, I cannot conceive."

Colonel Kenyon had with difficulty persuaded Frances to invite Mrs. Dixon to dine at Sudley, and on this occasion the effusion of the widow was so great, that when the two Colonels were left alone, after dinner, Forth had more than insinuated to Kenyon that he was very weary of it.

"I suppose it's all right about the money?" asked Kenyon, who perceived plainly that love had nothing to do with the proposed marriage, on Colonel Forth's part, at least.

"Oh, yes, that's right enough," answered Forth, and he was glad to know by Kenyon's questions that his daughter at least had kept faith with him on the subject of the late Mr. Dixon's will.

It wanted only a fortnight until the time that Mrs. Dixon had settled to be married, when the two lovers dined at Sudley, and money had, strange to say, never been mentioned between them. Many a time, however, with her head leaning on the Colonel's stalwart shoulder, had Mrs. Dixon murmured fondly in his ear the loving question:—

"And you care for me, for myself alone? Say it again, William!"

William had of course responded in the affirmative—indeed what could the poor man say? Mrs. Dixon made such love to him that he was obliged for the present at least feebly to make some acknowledgment. But oh! didn't he hate it all. He could see Frances' shining hazel eyes laughing at him, and exchanging merry glances with Sir Arthur Beaton at his expense. And even his old friend Kenyon did not quite conceal his amusement. "If only she would be quiet," often grimly reflected the unhappy Forth, but that was just what Mrs. Dixon would not be.

"To think in another fortnight I shall be your mother, dear," she said to Frances, looking benignly round the drawing-room, when the two ladies had retired there.

"My *step*-mother," said Frances, a little haughtily.

"It will be the same thing when I am married to your dear father, I think."

"Oh, I don't; a mother and a step-mother are very different."

But Mrs. Dixon was a very difficult person to snub. She was cool and self-assertive to a surprising degree, and only noticed what it suited her to see and hear. And presently Sir Arthur Beaton came into the room, having left the old comrades over their wine, and Mrs. Dixon's

sharp eyes perceived very plainly how it was with the young man's heart, and was amiable and obliging enough to make some excuse to run out of the room for a short time and leave him alone with Frances, while she went to powder her face and see how she was looking.

"She is disgusting, I think," said Frances, the moment her back was turned.

"Comes it pretty strong with the Colonel, eh?" laughed Sir Arthur.

"Do not let us talk of her," said Frances, rising. "Come into the conservatory, this room is so hot."

So they went together among the cool and fragrant flowers, and Frances plucked a rose that she knew would be begged for and carried away on Sir Arthur's breast. He was looking very handsome, and she smiled as he fastened the blossom in his coat. And presently Mrs. Dixon returned to the drawing-room, from whence she could see the two in the conservatory, standing talking together in the dim light, and she did not interrupt them. She took up a book and sat down, not, however, to read it, but to think that she had done very well for herself in this second venture into matrimony. She was ambitious, and liked to think of Colonel Kenyon as her son-in-law, and Sir Arthur Beaton as a friend. The late Mr. Dixon had not come of gentle birth, and some of *his* relations and friends had been trials, no doubt, during his lifetime to his wife. But this would be all changed now, proudly reflected the widow; and she smiled more tenderly than ever, when Colonel Forth and Colonel Kenyon came into the drawing-room, on the man who had just been confessing to his old friend that he "wished it was over."

The engaged pair returned to Headfort together in one of the Sudley carriages, and during this drive again Mrs. Dixon murmured on her William's breast how happy she was in his faithful love, and William thought he would be obliged to kiss her, though he did not like it, if Mrs. Dixon did. And after he got to his own house, somehow or other Colonel Kenyon's words that he hoped it was "all right about the money" recurred to his mind, and after sundry considerations he determined to speak about settlements to Mrs. Dixon next day. "For, of course," he argued, "if she's so fond of me she ought, in the event of her death, to leave what she's got to me, and it ought to be seen after."

Accordingly, the next day he did see after it. He went to call earlier than usual on Mrs. Dixon, looking very rubicund of visage, and after clearing his throat once or twice he began.

"By-the-bye, Sarah, I think I ought to tell you that though I have not much to settle on you, still I mean to settle what I have before our marriage, as I think it only right that people should mutually do this."

"How good, how generous of you!" said Mrs. Dixon, clasping one of his red hands between her own two well-shaped ones, and casting up her eyes to the ceiling, as if almost overcome by his greatness of soul.

"I think it only right," repeated the Colonel, firmly, "that we should both do this. I shall be able to leave you a little over two hundred a year, and I suppose your husband left you something."

"He left me," murmured Mrs. Dixon, rather in a subdued tone, now casting down her eyes, "twenty thousand pounds."

"Then where," asked Colonel Forth in a relieved and agreeable voice, "have you this money invested?"

Mrs. Dixon moved rather uneasily; she sighed, and for a moment did not speak.

"I have unfortunately lost some of it," she said at length.

"Lost some of it?" repeated the Colonel, appalled.

"But there is enough left, more than enough, dear, with your income combined, to give us every comfort; and we are not marrying each other for money, you know."

"No," replied the Colonel, but his jaw visibly fell.

"I will tell you how it happened," went on Mrs. Dixon, softly and insinuatingly. "I trusted someone I should not have done—a stock-broker, and a friend of poor Mr. Dixon's—and this man induced me to sell out of some securities which only paid a small percentage, and to trust him with fifteen thousand pounds for one fortnight, which he promised to double in that time; instead of which the wretch actually lost the whole sum, and then bolted to America, ashamed, as he well might be, to show his face here. But I have still five thousand pounds safely invested, and this, with your income, dear, will be quite enough for us. Won't it, William?"

For a moment or two William did not speak. He had

grown pale, and his feelings were actually too deep for words.

"You always said, you know, dear, it was for myself alone you thought of me," went on Mrs. Dixon, laying her hands caressingly on his arm; "say this now, William."

"Of course," answered the Colonel, hoarsely.

"You will see what a faithful, affectionate little wife I shall make you, and how far I will make our money go. I can keep up a good show, I assure you, on very little."

"And where," asked the Colonel, still in that hoarse changed voice, "is the money you have left?"

She named certain shares which he considered anything but a safe investment, and when he heard this, he could bear no more.

"I forgot," he said suddenly, seizing his hat, "that I have an appointment with Kenyon for one o'clock; it is that hour, so I must be off." And before she could stop him, he hurried to the door.

"Stay for a few moments," she entreated, pursuing him.

"I cannot just now; I will see you again about this matter; good-day." And he was gone.

Mrs. Dixon looked after him in amazement.

"He must have thought I had more money," she concluded after a moment's recollection; "John Appleby must have told him I had more—but he shall not back out of it now."

CHAPTER XXXIII.

A BREACH OF PROMISE.

It would be almost impossible to find words strong enough to describe Colonel Forth's mingled emotions of rage and disgust as he hurried from Mrs. Dixon's lodgings to his own house. He had been taken in, he considered, grossly taken in, and he had made a fool of himself; and now he was saddled with this woman for life! But he would get out of it—yes, if it cost him every penny he had in the world, he savagely reflected.

It was easy to determine this, but how was he to do it?

—he presently began asking himself, as he strode heavily up and down his narrow rooms. He did not go near Mrs. Dixon the whole day afterwards, and he could not sleep at night for thinking of the dilemma in which he found himself. He could not forget, though he should have liked to do so, how often he had protested to Mrs. Dixon that it was for herself alone he wished to marry her. He had said this when he had proposed to her, and he had said it many times since. Mrs. Dixon remained, if her fortune were gone; and how was he to tell her now that he did not mean to fulfil his words?

He got up the next morning with a headache, and in a furious temper, and kept flinging about his boots, cutting his chin as he tried to shave himself with his shaking hand, and swearing so audibly that his one servant thought the Colonel had gone mad. But something must be done, and at last a brilliant idea, he considered, darted into his exasperated brain. He would pretend that *he* had suddenly met with a monetary loss, though there was no truth in this, except that the day before he had paid his gas account!

But he must make some excuse, and he thought this a feasible one. Scarcely had he swallowed his breakfast, therefore, when he sat down to address an epistle to Mrs. Dixon, but even to know how to commence it he found far from easy. Hitherto he had begun his letters "Dear Sarah," but now he felt such familiarity must be dropped. No, a woman who had deceived him, as she had done, must be "dear Sarah" no more. Poor Mrs. Dixon had not in truth deceived him, for she had never mentioned money to him; but then the Colonel was determined to blame her, and being in truth ashamed of himself, took refuge in abusing her.

"DEAR MRS. DIXON," he accordingly commenced, "I regret very much to tell you that I have had a letter from my lawyer this morning, informing me of a serious monetary loss I have sustained, which will so reduce my present small income, that I fear after what you told me yesterday of your affairs, that a marriage between us will now be impossible. I need not tell you I regret this, but there is no help for it, and I remain,

"Yours sincerely,

"WILLIAM FORTH."

He despatched this by a private messenger, to Mrs. Dixon's lodgings, and then he felt more at ease in his mind. He lit a cigar, and he began to think he would feel all the better for a brandy and soda ; but before he thus indulged himself, he went out for a smoke in the little garden in front of his house, and walked backwards and forwards among the lilac bushes and evergreens, and finally sat down in the little rustic summer-house, where poor Ruth and Seaforth had dreamed their brief dream of love.

Suddenly his cigar nearly fell from his lips, while a muttered curse broke from them. *There*, in the act of opening the gate into the garden, was Mrs. Dixon herself. The Colonel started to his feet, and then sat down again, hoping the shrubs would hide him ; and as Mrs. Dixon passed down the walk to the door, it struck him in a moment that as she rang at the bell he might escape round the back of the summer-house, and get into the house by the kitchen door.

Warily watching her, he saw her look round, actually look at the summer-house, and he ducked his head lower beneath the bushes as she did so. Then he heard the maid-servant open the door ; heard the—to him—almost terrible words, uttered by the maid in reply to Mrs. Dixon's inquiry if Colonel Forth were at home.

"He's in the garden somewhere, ma'am, a-smoking ; likely in the summer-house there."

Again Mrs. Dixon looked round, and then advanced towards the spot where the Colonel sat shaking. In another moment her sharp eyes perceived him, and there was nothing left for him but to rise. He rose, and as he did so, Mrs. Dixon caught one of his hands in both of hers.

"Oh ! my poor William ; what news ! But it can make no change with *us* !"

She uttered these words in the tenderest and most sympathetic tone. She looked up into his face, and Colonel Forth felt that he was powerless before her.

"I ran up at once to tell you—to tell you with my own lips," continued Mrs. Dixon, breathlessly, "that it was not your money I thought of, William ; let that go as mine went—we have still each other !"

William did not commit himself in words, but he gasped.

"It was like you ; so generous ; so noble always ; to offer to release me at once ; but do you think I would

accept your sacrifice? No, William, in weal or woe, I still am yours."

William felt as if the ground were slipping away beneath his feet, but he made a faint effort.

"It is very good of you to say so, but——"

"It is not good," interrupted Mrs. Dixon, eagerly; "in love we do not count the cost; we only *feel*;" and she looked up in William's face as if she meant to kiss him, or expected him to kiss her.

But William was going to do nothing of the sort. The summer-house was in sight of the roadway, and even amid his misery he remembered this.

"Come into the house," he said, "people can see us here;" and so they went into the house together, and Mrs. Dixon went into it with a determined heart.

"Let us talk it all over," she said; "if between us we can raise three or four hundred a year, what more do we want?"

"It is very little," faltered the Colonel.

"Yes, but if we are poor in purse we are rich in something else," continued Mrs. Dixon, evidently meditating precipitating herself into his arms; but he backed suddenly, and put the table between them.

"I do not like to drag you into poverty," he said, from the vantage ground he had secured; "you have not been used to it, and don't know what it is. I, of course, have been accustomed to rough it."

"But it will not be such great poverty," urged Mrs. Dixon, "my five thousand pounds bring me in a certain income?"

Colonel Forth thought of where her five thousand pounds were invested, but he said nothing; he temporised.

"Let us take a few days to think it over," he remarked, "and see how this business of mine turns out; it may not be so bad as we think."

"But my anxiety——"

"It may all come right after all. I'll run up to town and see after this lawyer fellow of mine, and I'll write to you from there."

"But how can I bear the suspense? Promise me one thing, William, that, whatever happens, we shall not part."

Colonel Forth felt to promise this was impossible, as he had the fullest intention of parting.

But fortune favors the brave ; as he stood, uncertain what to say, to his delight Ruth's slender form appeared at the garden gate, and never had she been so welcome.

"Here is my daughter, Mrs. Audley," he said ; "we can't talk of this before her, you know ; I will see you presently ;" and Mrs. Dixon felt that it would be impossible to discuss the subject of their marriage before Ruth.

And Ruth looked rather annoyed when she entered the dining-room and saw who was with her father. She did not like Mrs. Dixon ; and she did not like the idea of his second marriage.

"I have a message for you from Colonel Kenyon," she said, addressing him. "I had a letter from Frances this morning, and he will be in the village this afternoon about three o'clock, and if you will go back to Sudley with him to dine and stay all night, he will be very glad, and he will drive you out."

"He is very good," answered the Colonel, and he drew out his handkerchief and wiped his damp brow.

"I will go, then," said Mrs. Dixon, softly ; "I shall see you later in the day, I suppose?" she added, looking at him tenderly.

"Yes, yes, to be sure, or I shall write," he hurriedly answered, and he opened the door of the room with alacrity for Mrs. Dixon, but he did not offer to escort her through the garden.

"Good-bye," she whispered, pressing his hand.

"Good-bye," he replied, without looking at her, and he mentally determined it should be a long good-bye indeed.

When he went back into the dining-room, he found Ruth sitting pensively by the fire. Old memories were crowding round her, and she always felt very sad when she entered her father's little house.

"Well, is she gone?" she asked, looking round.

"Yes," said the Colonel, and again he wiped his brow, and then went to the sideboard and drew out the brandy bottle.

"And you are really going to be married in ten days?" asked Ruth.

"Not so sure of that," he answered, briefly.

"What! have you had a quarrel?" said Ruth, smiling. The Colonel made no reply ; he thought of taking Ruth

into his confidence, but he was never quite sure that his daughters would not amuse themselves at his expense, so he remained silent.

"How is Audley this morning?" he asked, and so changed the conversation, and by-and-bye Ruth went away, and he was left to his own unhappy reflections.

On one thing he was determined, he *would not* see Mrs. Dixon again. He would go to Sudley, and write to her from there, and stay there until it was all settled.

And he carried this out. He went with his old friend back to Sudley, armed with a stock of garments to last him at least a fortnight; and after dinner, when the two men were alone, he told Kenyon of his trouble.

"I've made a fool of myself, Kenyon," he said, brusquely, after drinking three glasses of old port in rapid succession.

"My dear fellow, most of us do that once or twice in our lives," answered Kenyon, with a twinkle in his kindly eyes, for he rather guessed what was coming.

"That woman I was going to marry, Mrs. Dixon, has taken me in about her money—completely taken me in," meanly and untruthfully asserted Colonel Forth.

"What! She's not got so much, then?"

"She's got nothing, as far as I can make out; nothing about which there is any certainty, at least."

Colonel Kenyon gave a soft, low whistle.

"That's awkward," he said.

"It's confoundedly awkward, and I won't have it at any price!" roared Forth. "I won't marry her, Kenyon. Will you help me out of it?"

"Easier said than done, I should say."

"That's the worst of it. A leech is nothing to her. The way she sticks to one, and makes love to one, is positively indelicate!"

Kenyon laughed aloud; in fact, the expression of Forth's face was irresistible.

"It's no laughing matter for me," he continued, irritably. "I wrote to her when I found it was all moonshine about the money, and told her it was no use talking of marrying when there was nothing to marry on; and what do you think she did? Rushed up to my house, my dear fellow, and said all sorts of foolish, idiotic things about love. Love, indeed!"

Again Kenyon laughed.

"But what made you think she was rich?" he asked presently. "And how did you find out she has nothing?"

Forth hesitated; he was ashamed to tell an honorable man like Kenyon he had gone up to town to look at the late Mr. Dixon's will, for he knew Kenyon would despise such an action.

"That ass, Appleby," he said, after a moment's consideration, "told me her husband left her twenty thousand pounds, and so I believe he did, but the fool of a woman speculated with it, and lost fifteen thousand pounds, she tells me, in a fortnight."

"But she still has five, then?"

"Yes, badly invested; but I don't care what she has; *I won't have her!*"

"You are quite determined on this?"

"Quite determined; I'm sick of the whole affair."

"Well then, write her a straightforward letter, and tell her you want to back out of it; but of course you must offer her some compensation."

"Compensation?" repeated Forth, ruefully.

"Yes, certainly; you asked her to marry you, and if you have changed your mind, you ought to pay for it."

"How much do you think——" hesitated Forth, who did not quite see the force of his friend's argument.

"Well, say five hundred pounds."

"Five hundred pounds! Where am I to get five hundred pounds, do you think, to throw away in such a manner?"

"We'll raise it somehow; you are my Frances' father, so I owe you more than five hundred pounds."

Colonel Forth raised his shaggy light eyebrows in pure surprise at the other's words.

"I should write to her at once if I were you, and have it settled," continued Kenyon; and Forth having agreed to this, he retired to the library to compose his letter to Mrs. Dixon.

"DEAR MRS. DIXON," he wrote after some consideration, "I have thought over our conversation this morning, and the position of our affairs, and I have come to the conclusion that a marriage between us is out of the question. To my mind, to live on a very small income is simply miserable, and I am sure you are too sensible not to see

it in the same light when you reflect upon it. But I am very anxious not to cause you any annoyance or disappointment, and I trust we shall be able to arrange this amicably. I am staying with my son-in-law, Colonel Kenyon, at present, and shall be glad to receive a letter from you here, and hope to be able to meet your views on the subject; though you must please not to forget that I am a very poor man. Still, with assistance, I may be able to do something.

“And I remain,

“Yours very sincerely,

“WILLIAM FORTH.”

Colonel Forth read and re-read this, and thought it was a masterpiece, and carried it into the dining-room for his friend's approval.

Colonel Kenyon glanced over it with a smile.

“Well, will that do?” asked Forth, with some pride in his own composition.

“Cold, and cool enough anyhow,” said Kenyon, still smiling.

“I *must* be cold and cool, my dear fellow! If I showed the slightest warmth she would be here in no time, throwing herself into my arms, and I really cannot stand it.”

“Very well, all right, send it; we shall see what she says.”

They saw the next day by the last post. A letter was placed in Colonel Forth's hands in Mrs. Dixon's too well-known writing, and, with a flushed face, he retired at once to his own room to read it.

“DEAR COLONEL FORTH (I almost wrote my dearest William) for it seems impossible to me, *quite impossible* that *your* hand traced the hard and cruel words I have just received. Did I not ask you when you proposed to marry me, when you entreated me to accept you, if you were *sure* that you sought me and loved me for myself alone? You know I did; you cannot deny this, I am sure; and here am I, unchanged and faithful, and yet you cast me off! But the laws of my country will defend me, and as a poor, broken-hearted, forsaken woman, I shall claim their protection. I shall write no more, for my words of tenderness are of no avail; but I repeat, I *cannot* understand it, nor shall I put up with it.

“SARAH DIXON.”

"She means business," said Colonel Kenyon, laughing, when the alarmed Forth was obliged to let him read this letter. "As I told you, my dear fellow, you will have to pay, and quite right too."

It is needless to relate all the correspondence which followed between the middle-aged pair. Colonel Forth offered, by Colonel Kenyon's advice, five hundred pounds compensation for his breach of promise, but Mrs. Dixon refused it as inadequate. Finally, after much disputation, she agreed to take seven hundred pounds, which Colonel Kenyon advanced.

"And let us keep it to ourselves," said this kindly man; "for after all, my dear Forth, you know she may really have been fond of you."

"I shall never give another woman a chance of being fond of me, that's all I can say," replied Forth with energy; and he never did.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

TRUST BETRAYED.

THE chill autumn had faded into cold dark winter, and the sea-swept coast on which Headfort stands was bleak with winds and storms and mist, yet still Major Audley lay a prisoner in the room to which he had been carried insensible two months ago, and still his young wife watched and waited on him, hiding as best she could her weary heart.

Seaforth went home for Christmas-time, but Sir Arthur Beaton either did not ask for leave or could not get it. He spent Christmas Day at Sudley Park, where there was much feasting and mirth. But Ruth did not go, and *her* Christmas was anything but a lively one, for nearly all the day she was in the sick room of an impatient, irritable invalid.

Audley, indeed, could not reconcile himself to the changed condition of his life. The tall, stalwart, good-looking soldier suddenly found himself broken alike in health and spirits, and it was no doubt a heavy cross to bear. And it was the remembrance of this which made

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Ruth so patient and gentle in all her ways to him. But do what she would, she could not satisfy him; and at last he decided that in the beginning of the New Year he would go up to town and try what a change of air and scene would do for him.

Ruth said nothing to dissuade him, but her heart sank at the prospect of leaving Frances, for it was the one bit of brightness in her life—her almost daily visitors from Sudley. They had tried to persuade her to go there for Christmas, but "How can I?" she had answered pathetically, and Colonel Kenyon agreed with her.

"It would be cruel to leave the poor fellow upstairs," he said, "but we will come and see you in the morning, Ruth; and Frances here," and he laid his hand kindly on his wife's shoulder, "must bring you some holly."

And they came, and not only brought the "holly," but all manner of good things. Frances was in high spirits, and full of excitement, and was looking handsomer than ever.

"How odious that you can't be with us," she said; "I don't see why you could not come."

Ruth made no answer; she still wore black for Miss Audley, and she felt very sad. She was only a girl in years still, and her life was such a dreary and weary one, that on a day like this she could not help thinking of it. She could not help thinking, too, that Frances never seemed to remember the bitter sacrifice she had made for her sake. She was as bright and gay and careless as though no shadow had fallen on her young sister's life, and though Ruth tried not to feel annoyed by this, it sometimes seemed very, very strange to her.

"Well, at all events, I wish you a merry Christmas and a happy New Year," said Frances, presently, rising and preparing to leave; "ah, here is Sir Arthur—Hugh, we might as well drive him over with us."

"Just as you like, dearest," answered Colonel Kenyon; and when a few moments later Sir Arthur entered the room, he asked him to go back to Sudley with them.

"I saw the carriage at Mrs. Audley's door," answered Sir Arthur, a faint color mounting to his brown, good-looking face, "so I came across to ask what time I was expected this evening?"

"No time like the present; drive over with us now,"

said Colonel Kenyon ; and Sir Arthur was but too pleased to accept, though he asked for a few moments' grace to run back to the Fort to tell his servant to follow him with what he would require.

For he was going to remain all night at Sudley, and indeed spent so much of his time there that the neighbors sometimes gave a little shrug when they spoke of it. And Colonel Forth by no means liked it, and often contemplated giving his old friend a hint of his opinion on the subject. But his own matrimonial misadventure had made him rather shy of interfering with Frances, as he was not a little afraid of her sharp tongue and biting jests.

As Sir Arthur hurried to the Fort and back to Ruth's house, Frances seemed in the gayest spirits. She kissed her sister on each cheek when she went away, and Ruth stood at the window and watched them go, and then with a heavy sigh went up to Audley's room, where he was lying on a couch by the fire.

"It was Frances and Colonel Kenyon," she said.

"And who rang the bell twice after the Kenyons came?" asked Audley, looking up.

"That was Sir Arthur Beaton."

"And he didn't come up to speak to me?" said Audley, with some anger in his tone.

"He was going to Sudley with them, and he had no time."

"He goes a great deal too often to Sudley—old Kenyon is a fool!"

Ruth bit her lips to suppress the retort that rose upon them.

"I mean to give Beaton a bit of my mind some day about that sister of yours," continued Audley irritably.

"You have no right to speak thus," said Ruth, and she left the room, and Audley looked angrily after her.

"That woman, Madam Jezebel, comes here far too much," he thought, jealously ; "they've fine times downstairs, I've no doubt, while I am laid up here like a log ; but I'll soon put a stop to it. I'm not going to have my house made a lounge for the young men from the Fort, to please Mrs. Kenyon or anyone else."

This was a bad beginning for Christmas Day, and Audley never recovered his temper, and was secretly enraged by seeing Ruth look so pale and sad. It is,

indeed, a miserable thing for two people who live together not to be on good terms, and most miserable when the two are man and wife ! Audley's very love for Ruth made him so captious, so fretful, that he would have tried a woman with the calmest and sweetest disposition. But Ruth was naturally warm and tender-hearted, and strong emotions and deep feelings were hidden in her heart. And there were two people whom she had loved with a depth and truth that she only understood. One was the beautiful sister whom she had admired and almost worshipped since she was a little child ; the other, the young lover of her girlhood, from whom she had been torn by the cruellest selfishness.

And she never forgave Audley this, and never could. And he had realised this in all its full bitterness before his dreadful accident had so far drawn her nearer to him that she was sorry for him, and had done her best to ease his sufferings. But it was a weary, weary task, and this Christmas Day was a very dreary one, spent together by the unmatched pair.

At Sudley, on the contrary, the old roof rang with mirth and laughter, for some former military friends of Colonel Kenyon's were staying at the house, and merry tales were told of bygone days, when the greyhaired owner of Sudley had been young and brown. But not happier—not so happy as he was now. Did two, who sat at his hospitable board, realise this—two, who thought very little of him, and were living in a dream of excitement and forgetfulness of everything but each other's presence ? Yes, it had come to this—the vain, wordly, beautiful Frances Kenyon had allowed herself to drift nearer and nearer to a danger she affected to despise. She had always liked Arthur Beaton, liked his youth, his devotion, and his good looks ; and since he had become Sir Arthur she had liked him better still. She was afraid of losing him, for one thing ; for naturally there were many fair girls and fair women also, ready to smile on a rich, handsome, and agreeable young man. And Frances was really jealous if he spoke to any one else, though she was always gaily bidding him to flirt with this one or the other. And she led him on and on ; led him to forget everything but the passionate love which intoxicated him, and overwhelmed the nobler instincts of his heart.

She never paused to reflect on the wrong she was doing. He was devoted to her, and this satisfied her; and if for a moment she felt she liked him too well, the next she forgot this, or told herself her life would be so weary without him. Of the noble-hearted gentleman whose name she bore, she scarcely cared to think, nor of the priceless gifts she was flinging to the winds. The foolish woman in her vanity thought more of a young man's love than her husband's constant affection and trust.

And this Christmas Day, Sir Arthur had brought her a gift which he had placed in her hands with some tender words; a gift of rare and beautiful stones set in the shape of a diamond heart, and Frances was delighted with it.

"You know it is symbolical," he said, looking at her intently with his grey earnest eyes.

"Of what?" she said, lightly; but the next moment she laid her slender hand on his. "I understand," she half-whispered; and she wore the jewelled heart on her shapely throat during the evening, and when someone admired it she said it had been given to her long ago!

She went to see Ruth the next day, but she did not mention Sir Arthur's gift to her.

"We had rather a jolly party," she told her; "the Heathcotes are pleasant people," and so on.

"And Sir Arthur, how did he enjoy himself?" asked Ruth, who wished to give a word of advice to her sister.

"Very well, seemingly," answered Frances, carelessly; "I drove him in just now, and he has gone to the Fort, but he will be over here presently to see Audley."

"He is not going back to Sudley again, is he?" inquired Ruth, gravely.

"Of course he is; how on earth am I to amuse Mrs. Heathcote, and Lady Hastings too, who is going to dine with us to-day, without any young men?"

"He seems to be so much with you."

Frances gave a little shrug.

"He is very nice; he helps to amuse me," she said; and then she began telling Ruth about the Indian embroidery on Mrs. Heathcote's dress, and before Ruth could say anything more of Sir Arthur, he arrived, and went upstairs for a few moments to speak to Audley, who intended the first time he saw him to give him a bit of his mind about Mrs. Kenyon.

But this was not so easy as he expected. There was a certain reserve in Beaton's manner that Audley found very difficult to break through when he approached the subject of his visits to Sudley.

"You seem to be the adopted friend of the family," at last said Audley, a little scornfully; "take care, old fellow!"

Beaton drew himself up and colored.

"They are very kind to me," he answered coldly; "well, good day, Audley, I am glad to see you so much better;" and he shook Audley's hand and went away, and Audley felt that his interference had been anything but appreciated.

He, of course, began to rail Frances to Ruth the moment Beaton was gone, and Ruth escaped from his hard and cutting words by going out for a long walk by the sea coast, and the fresh air did her good. She returned looking brighter, and as Seaforth was not at Headfort, Audley made no objections when on the following day she again proposed to take a walk.

As she went out, a strange wish rose in her mind once more to go down to the bay. She had never done this since the night which had proved the turning point of her fate; but she had often looked with a half-averted, shuddering glance from the back windows of the house at the sands below, bound in by the waveworn, rocky walls, down which she had gone in the darkness and the storm.

And now a sort of weird fascination and curiosity drew her footsteps to the very spot. She was alone and free to do as she wished, and presently she found herself walking close to the sea, and looking towards the steep and shaggy cliffs, beneath which she had crept with her heavy burden.

She seemed to see herself again as she delved and dug in yon shifting sand. How many times the sea had rolled and murmured over the narrow trench since then, but the secret lay still unbarred when the waves crept back, and only Audley knew—*only Audley*—thought Ruth, with clasped hands and dilated eyes.

She stood still a few minutes, but presently walked on, going to the very end of the bay, and then commenced to mount and cross the vast blocks of rock, to which the brown seaweed clung, and where the sea flowers dwelt amid the pools of salt water that the tide had left. A

somewhat dangerous, rugged path this, round the jutting point of the bay, at the other side of which the beautiful sands stretch out for miles and miles. Ruth meant to go for a long walk, and was proceeding forward with bent head, when to her great surprise she saw Seaforth approaching her in the opposite direction, who also intended to have a long walk by the sea.

They met, both embarrassed and confused.

"I thought you were at home?" faltered Ruth, with blushing cheeks and downcast eyes.

"I came back last night. I only went for Christmas Day."

"I did not know."

"Are you having a long walk—may I join you?"

"Yes," said Ruth, still without looking up.

But as they went along together, listening to the mystic voice of the great waters, their first embarrassment soon passed away. Above them was a bright, steely blue winter sky, and around them a sharp, cold, clear air, and before them the long-ridged yellow sand. They did not talk of Audley, nor of the old days when they had plucked the wild flowers in the fields. They talked of the sea, and the strange stories which float from its vast breast, the fabled mermaid with her yellow hair, carrying down the drowned sailor to its silent depths; the "wedges of gold, great anchors, heaps of pearl, all scattered at the bottom of the sea."

Ruth had a pretty fancy, and loved to think and talk of things that were as blank walls to Frances and her father. As a child she had often wandered away alone, and invented many a romantic tale for her own gratification. And there is something in the sea which strikes on the hidden chords of such a nature, awaking vague dreams of an unfulfilled existence.

"Life is so strange," she said, softly.

"An unending struggle, it seems to me," answered Seaforth, "always dark and difficult."

"Not always!"

"Nearly always, then; and we pay too heavy a price, I think, for its brief joys."

They both were thinking at the moment of *their* "brief joy" which had faded in its dawn. But they did not speak of it; Seaforth, indeed, avoided doing so, for he did not

wish to distress and worry Ruth, knowing that this walk was a sort of rest for her after her long watching and waiting in a sick room.

At last she said that they must return, for the short winter twilight was creeping round them, and it was almost dark before they reached the village. But there was a rosy flush on Ruth's sweet face, and her step was light as Seaforth helped her over the big dark rocks, and as they stood for a moment or two listening to the mysterious gurgles of the retreating waves in the hollows and clefts below them.

"It's been a good walk; will you come again?" asked Seaforth before they parted.

"Perhaps," answered Ruth, smiling.

Then they shook hands, and Ruth returned to her unloved home, and found that Audley had been fretting and fuming about her absence.

"You have stayed out far too late," he said; "it's nearly dark."

"I walked further than I intended," said Ruth, and so the matter dropped.

The next day the doctors allowed Audley to be carried downstairs, and in the afternoon he had several visitors, and among them Sir Arthur Beaton, "Seaforth is back," he told Audley, who frowned when he heard the news, and asked when he had arrived.

"To-day, I think," said Beaton carelessly, who was still staying at Sudley, and Ruth turned her head away with a conscious blush, for she had not told Audley she had met Seaforth on the previous afternoon, as she knew Audley would be so very angry.

But she did not ask leave to go out any more. She used to see Seaforth pass and re-pass the house on his way to the post office sometimes, and once he called on Audley, but Ruth did not go into the room while he was there.

On New Year's Day, the Kenyons called in the morning, and Frances told Ruth the party at Sudley was to break up next day.

"And I shall not be sorry," she added, "I have got rather tired of Mrs. Heathcote."

She kissed Ruth affectionately when she went away, and wished her a happy New Year; and on the following day Frances did not come to Headfort, which did not surprise Ruth, as she knew the guests at Sudley would be leaving.

But the day after she rather expected her, but Frances never came. About seven o'clock in the evening, however, while Audley was lying smoking on the couch by the fire, and Ruth was sitting reading, a carriage drove up to the street door, and the bell rang.

"Whoever can that be? just close on dinner-time too," said Audley, looking at his watch.

A moment later Colonel Kenyon was ushered into the room, and after shaking hands with Ruth and Audley, he asked for Frances.

"She's not her," said Ruth, surprised.

"What! not here?" repeated Colonel Kenyon quickly. "When did she leave. then; somehow I must have missed her on the road?"

"But she has never been here to-day," said Ruth, turning pale.

"Never been here! Good God! something may have happened then. She left Sudley at ten this morning to come here—she drove in—were on earth can she be?"

He, too, had grown very pale, and his voice was full of excitement, but still not a thought of the truth ever crossed his mind.

"She may be at your father's, or at the Hilliards'," he went on hastily; "I heard her say she was going to call at the Hilliards', and no doubt they have persuaded her to stay. But after it got dark I grew a bit uneasy and brought the carriage to take her home. She sent the carriage back this morning, and gave no orders to the coachman, so I suppose she was sure I would come out for her, and I certainly expected to find her here."

"She may be at the Hilliards'," said Ruth, but her very lips had grown white.

"She must be," answered Colonel Kenyon, seizing his hat; "there or at your father's; I'll go at once and seek her."

"Bring her back here," faltered Ruth.

"Yes, all right;" and after he had left the room, Ruth had not courage to look in Audley's face.

"What do you think of it?" he asked, in a strange voice.

"She must be at the Hilliards'; or perhaps she has met Lady Hastings, and gone to spend the day with her."

"Or with Arthur Beaton," said Audley, with biting scorn.

Ruth started, as if he had struck her.

"How dare you say such a thing?" she cried.

Then she went to the house door, and stood there listening with a beating heart; and presently she heard the voices of her father and Colonel Kenyon approaching, and she ran a step or two forward into the street to meet them.

"Have you found her?" she asked quickly.

"No," answered Colonel Kenyon, who was quite out of breath with haste. "She's not been to your father's nor to Hilliard's. I fancy she must have met Lady Hastings, and gone on to Amherst with her."

"Ask the coachman where he left her," said Colonel Forth in an agitated voice.

"It was John, the groom, sir, brought the phaeton back," answered the coachman, in reply to Colonel Kenyon's query. "Mrs. Kenyon drove the ponies herself this morning, and I asked John if she had given any further orders, and he said not."

"She may be at home now," suggested Ruth nervously.

"No doubt she is," said Colonel Kenyon. "That's what I've been saying to Forth. She would hardly stay to dinner at Amherst without letting me know. I'll go back straight now to Sudley."

"I'll go with you," said Forth.

It was settled thus, but before the two old friends started, Ruth asked them in a low tone to let her know at once if Frances was at Sudley.

"I feel so nervous," she said, with a little shiver.

They promised to do this, and they drove quickly away, and Ruth went upstairs to the drawing-room, walking up and down the half-dark room in a state of great agitation, and she refused to go down to the dining-room for dinner when Audley sent for her.

But just about nine o'clock she heard a horse galloping down the village, and then stop at their door, and she at once hastily descended into the hall.

The servant had opened the door, and one of the grooms from Sudley stood outside.

"Is Mrs. Kenyon at home?" asked Ruth, forcing the words from her lips.

"No, please, ma'am, I was to tell you," replied the groom, touching his hat. "Mrs. Kenyon has not returned, but the

Colonel and Colonel Forth, ma'am, have gone on to Sir James Hastings'."

"Oh!" said Ruth, with a sort of gasp, and she went into the dining-room, the door of which was open.

Audley, who was within, had heard both her question and the groom's reply, and he only waited until the man rode away to ring the bell, which was answered by his soldier servant.

"Go across to the Fort," he said, in a calm, hard voice, "and give my compliments to Sir Arthur Beaton, and ask him if he will come over here for a smoke."

The man at once left the room to obey his order, and Ruth stood with a pale averted face and clasped hands until he returned.

Six or seven minutes elapsed, and then he rapped at the room door, and came in.

"Please, sir," he said, with a military salute, "Major Cary's compliments" (Major Cary had commanded at the Fort since Audley's accident), "and I was to tell you Sir Arthur Beaton left the Fort on a few days' leave of absence this morning."

"Ah, that will do, shut the door," said Audley coolly; and after he was gone, Audley looked at Ruth.

"You know what it all means, I suppose?" he said. "Your sister has eloped with Beaton."

"No, no!" cried Ruth, with uncontrollable emotion, wringing her hands, "she could not, *could not* be so vile."

CHAPTER XXXV.

NEWS.

RUTH did not attempt to take any rest all that miserable night, but wandered from room to room in a half-distracted state. And as the dull winter dawn crept over the earth and sea, again she heard a carriage drive down the village, and stop at the house door. She hurried to open it herself, and saw her father getting out of the carriage alone.

She asked no questions, she could not; but Colonel Forth understood without a word being spoken the mute, agonised query of her eyes.

"She is not at the Hastings'," he said hoarsely; "she has never been. Kenyon's like a madman. He thinks she has been murdered."

Still no word came from Ruth's white lips. She grasped her father's hand, and pulled him into the dining-room, and shut the door.

"You don't know anything?" he asked, quickly and nervously.

"Father," she gasped out in broken accents, "Sir Arthur Beaton—is not at the Fort."

Colonel Forth's face, which had been a dull purplish color, for he and Colonel Kenyon had been up all night, suddenly grew a fiery scarlet.

"You don't mean to insinuate, surely——. You don't think——"

"Oh! I don't know what to think," said Ruth, miserably, "but Major Audley thinks——"

"Not that she has gone off with Beaton?" asked Colonel Forth, hotly and indignantly. "What right has Audley to suppose or suggest such a thing?"

"It seems," answered Ruth, in great distress, "that he knew more than we did; that—that—before Frances married, Sir Arthur cared for her so much, he tried to shoot himself when he heard she was engaged to Colonel Kenyon—when he had what was called the accident with the revolver, you know. But it was no accident, Major Audley told me last night; he deliberately tried to shoot himself, and Major Audley ran into the room just in time to save him."

"And why were we not told all this before? What right had Audley to keep such a secret to himself, and allow poor Kenyon constantly to ask this young man to Sudley, if there were such a story about him as this?"

"For Sir Arthur's sake he could not tell it."

"It was madness, folly—inconceivable folly, if this be true—for Kenyon ever to have him within his doors! Good heavens! if she has been such a fool! But I don't believe it; vain as she always was, I cannot believe she would be so utterly mad, so utterly worthless, as to leave her home with Beaton."

"But where can she be?" asked Ruth, wringing her hands.

"I would rather she were lying dead in a ditch with

her throat cut, for the sake of her purse, as poor Kenyon thinks," answered Colonel Forth, sternly, "than know she was so lost, so disgraced, as to leave the man who saved my life—the man who has only been too good, too kind to her, and to all of us—for a youth like Beaton."

"Oh! I pray God she may not have done so!" said Ruth, with a passionate burst of tears. "Yes, she would be better dead!"

"Had you any suspicions?" asked Colonel Forth, uneasily. "Beaton was at Sudley all last week, but I certainly did not see them much together; did they ever come here together?"

"They did sometimes, and I spoke to Frances, and said I hoped she would not make Sir Arthur care for her, and she only laughed—of course I never thought——"

"How do you know Beaton is not at the Fort?" interrupted Colonel Forth, curtly.

"Because last night—after the groom came to tell me Frances was not at Sudley, Major Audley sent over to the Fort to ask Sir Arthur to come here to smoke; and Major Cary sent an answer back that Sir Arthur had left the Fort in the morning on a few days' leave of absence."

Colonel Forth's face had paled during Ruth's reply, and he began to walk up and down the room with hasty strides.

"It's very odd, certainly," he said; "she disappeared yesterday morning."

"Where did she leave the phaeton before the groom drove it back to Sudley?"

"Just near my house, at the beginning of High Street."

"And—had she anything with her?" asked Ruth with faltering tongue.

"I asked John, the groom, that question. 'Nothing' he said, 'but a small sealskin handbag.'"

Ruth clasped her hands together.

"Oh! father, she may have been robbed and—Oh! she may be lying dead or dying now!"

"Kenyon and I have been up all night, and the whole of the road from here to Sudley has been searched, and Kenyon was having the lake dragged when I left Sudley; he will be here by nine, and will put the case into the hands of the police, unless——"

Colonel Forth paused and hesitated, and Ruth could say nothing, for Frances' mysterious disappearance could

only be accounted for by a tragic or disgraceful cause, either of which was so terrible to Ruth.

She got breakfast for her father, and eagerly drank some tea herself, for her throat was parched, and while she was taking this they saw Colonel Kenyon drive up to the house, and Ruth ran into the hall, holding out both hands to him as he came in.

For there was a look on his face which would have moved the coldest heart; a look of despair so terrible, so overwhelming, that Ruth gave a little cry and drew his cold hands nearer to her.

"You—have not found her?" she faltered.

He shook his head,

"We shall never find her alive," he said, in a hoarse changed, hollow voice; "our darling is dead."

Ruth stood confused, overwhelmed with the agony of her own feelings.

"I have no hope," went on Colonel Kenyon, and there was none in his voice or face. "If she had been living she would not have let me pass last night—as I did."

"And you think——"

"I think some ruffian for the sake of her money or her ornaments—but I cannot speak of it."

He sat down on one of the hall chairs as he spoke, as if utterly overcome, and put one of his trembling hands over his pallid face; but at this moment Colonel Forth came out of the dining-room, and went up to him.

"Come in beside the fire, my dear fellow," he said, addressing Kenyon, and touching his shoulder; "you are quite worn out, and Ruth will give you some tea."

Colonel Kenyon rose without a word, and went into the dining-room, and Ruth drew an armchair to the fire, on which he sank down, and poured him out some tea and brought it to him.

"Thank you, my dear," he said, and that was all; but as he sat there, so grey, so aged, so hopeless, Ruth and her father exchanged many a pitying glance.

"I shall offer a large reward," he said presently, without looking up.

"Yes," answered Colonel Forth; and then he began moving restlessly about the room. "You had no quarrel with Frances, had you?" he asked suddenly.

"With my darling?" said Colonel Kenyon, as if greatly

surprised ; "none, none—not one word. We parted as we always did. She told me that she was coming here, but that she should soon be back—and I watched her drive away——"

Here he broke down, and a sob wrung from the brave man's heart choked his utterance ; and Ruth laid her hand tenderly on his shoulder.

"Oh ! don't, Hugh, don't !" she said ; but what else could she say ? She could not speak of hope when she could see none ; when a black shadow lay over her own heart ; a prescience of a great wrong done to this kindly gentleman.

"We must try to keep up," said Colonel Forth, passing his large hand with a quick gesture over his eyes, where an unwonted moisture had stolen at the sight of the grief of his old friend. "We had best see the Inspector of Police now, I think—or shall we wait ?"

"Why should we wait ?" answered Colonel Kenyon, rising. "I am ready ; let us go now."

Ruth followed them into the passage, and again wrung Colonel Kenyon's hand, and then watched the two go out on their dismal errand.

"Come back here," she said before they went, and when she was left alone she sat down and covered her face with her hands, trembling and shuddering at the idea of what any moment might bring forth.

A minute or two later the postman rang at the house door, and Ruth started to her feet, listening with parted lips and fast-beating heart to some words he was saying to the servant. Then the servant brought in the letters, and with a ghastly face Ruth drew near the silver tray on which they lay, and put out a trembling hand to turn them over.

But there were none in *her* handwriting. For a moment this seemed a sort of relief ; and yet it would have ended this gnawing anxiety, this frightful uncertainty. The letters were all for Audley, and presently Ruth carried them upstairs, and he looked at her inquiringly as she entered the room.

"Well, is there any news ?" he said.

"None," she answered, and she laid the letters on the bed.

"She has not written, then ?"

Ruth shuddered.

"Colonel Kenyon and my father have been here," she said, in a low pained tone; "and they believe that she has been murdered—that she is dead."

"Not she, my dear!" answered Audley, scoffingly. "Do they think that Arthur Beaton is dead too?"

"I told my father he was not at the Fort, and he was very angry even at the idea. Of course, Colonel Kenyon has no suspicion."

"He is a fool," said Audley, impatiently, "a trustful fool; that woman was an angel in his eyes—but he'll soon be wiser."

But even Audley, hard and cynical as he was, felt moved to pity when—later in the day—he saw Colonel Kenyon's face, on which the grey shadow of despair was so plainly imprinted. He had offered a thousand pounds reward for information that would lead to the discovery of his wife, and there was much excitement among the police in consequence, and the whole country side round Headfort was being carefully searched.

"Why don't they go to the railway station first?" said Audley to Ruth. "It would be very easy to find out what train Beaton left Headfort by, and if he left alone or with a lady; it would simplify matters a good deal if your father or the police went to the Fort to make inquiries."

But he did not suggest this to the grey, broken-hearted man who sat at his table, pushing away the food they placed before him, and with his head bowed down so low. Beaton's name was never mentioned, and Colonel Kenyon had completely forgotten his existence; had forgotten everything indeed but the overwhelming bitterness of his loss. Lunch was on the table when he and Colonel Forth returned to Ruth's, and Audley asked them to remain for it, and they stayed, but Colonel Kenyon "broke no bread;" his grief indeed was beyond expression.

No news came in all day, and as the evening gathered in, Colonel Kenyon returned to Sudley, though both Audley and Ruth urged him to remain with them.

But he would not.

"I may be nearer my darling there," he said to Ruth; for he was quite convinced that Frances had been robbed and murdered, and probably lay hidden in some of the fields between Headfort and Sudley; and not one of them had the courage to suggest any other solution for her disappearance.

So he went away alone, but Colonel Forth agreed to go over at once to the Park if anything was discovered; and about nine in the evening the Inspector of Police called, and asked to see Colonel Forth, who had remained at Ruth's to dinner. The Inspector hesitated a moment, and then asked Colonel Forth if there was any reason to suspect that "the lady had voluntarily left her home?"

Forth started as if something had stung him, and stared at the man angrily in the face.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

The Inspector then proceeded to inform him that the man who gave out the tickets at Headfort Station had sold a first-class ticket for London to a lady to go by the eleven train, whom he thought was remarkably like Mrs. Kenyon, of Sudley Park, though he was not very well acquainted with her appearance.

"Was the lady alone?" asked Colonel Forth, with trembling lips.

"Yes, she was alone when she took the ticket," the Inspector said; "but," he added, "one of the porters had informed him that 'a young gentleman' joined her before the train started, and they left together in the same compartment."

"This could not have been Mrs. Kenyon," said Colonel Forth; "my daughter had no intention of going to town." But all the same the policeman left Major Audley's house feeling pretty sure he was on the right track.

Colonel Forth went back to the dining-room, after his interview with the Inspector, in a very excited condition of mind. He looked uneasily at Audley, who was lying on the couch, and then at Ruth, and something in the expression of his face struck them both.

"Any news?" asked Audley briefly.

"That policeman fellow has got hold of some story—a most unlikely story—that a lady, something like Frances, took a ticket for London yesterday, to go by the eleven train; but he admits he hardly knows her by sight," answered Forth with agitation.

"Ah!" said Audley, but the monosyllable expressed much.

"And—and did he say anything else?" asked Ruth with gasping breath.

"Some folly; nothing certain," replied the Colonel,

pouring himself out a glass of port with his trembling hand.

"Why not send over to the Fort, or go over, and ask what train Beaton started by?" said Audley, coolly.

"Because, Major Audley, I do not wish to cast what I believe to be an unjust suspicion on my daughter's name," replied Colonel Forth with indignation; and Audley said nothing more, but turned his head round and went on reading his newspaper, while Forth continued drinking glass after glass of port, trying to drown his own uneasy reflections.

Another miserable sleepless night was spent by the two who had loved Frances Kenyon too well, and then the blow fell, and their idol was shattered. Many lines have been penned, and many a tale told, of the hopes and fears, the joys and sorrows, carried so carelessly in the postman's bag! But, perhaps, never was a letter received with more intense anxiety, opened with more trembling fingers, read with more anguish and shame, than the one which Ruth received on the second morning after Frances' disappearance.

It was from Frances. And Ruth, recognising the handwriting, tore it from its envelope in a whirl of agitation, a passion of emotion too strong for words, and she read it with indignant flashing eyes, with disgust, great anger, and shame in her burning heart.

"MY DEAR RUTH,

"I suppose you are all very angry with me, but the situation was growing too strained at Sudley, and I have not strength to give up Arthur. He has cared for me very much, you know, for a long time, long before my marriage, and at last he has persuaded me to take the irrecoverable step of leaving my home with him, and I do not regret it. We start this evening for Paris, and from there go on to the Riviera, and as I trust Colonel Kenyon will get divorced from me as soon as possible, I shall, I expect, return to England as Lady Beaton, and then I dare say all this will be forgotten. I am sorry for poor K.; but it is miserable to be married to a man you do not care for, and then his age made it so unsuitable. However, all that is past and over, and I should not be surprised if K. were to marry again. Arthur is only too anxious to marry

me, and says he shall never be quite happy until he can do so. I am very sorry if I have vexed you ; but write to me in Paris to the address below, and tell me you forgive me. I suppose Audley and my father will have been calling me all sorts of bad names, but luckily I won't hear them in the sunny South. Always with love, affectionately yours,
"FRANCES."

Every word of this heartless letter seemed to cut like a sharp knife into Ruth's heart. This was the sister she had loved then, the sister for whose sake she had wrecked her own life ! And then Ruth remembered the anguish on Colonel Kenyon's worn face ; the unutterable misery in his eyes.

With an expression of loathing and disgust she flung Frances' letter passionately on the floor, and then stood, pale and panting, thinking what she ought to do. She would send for her father, she decided, for she shrank from telling Audley ; shrank from listening to the gibing words with which she knew he would hear the news.

She sent their soldier-servant at once up to request that her father would come down immediately ; and very shortly afterwards, haggard and unshaven, Colonel Forth appeared, and when his bloodshot eyes fell on Ruth's excited face, he knew in a moment their worst fears had been realised.

"Have you heard?" he gasped out.

"Yes, she is shameful, shameless !" cried Ruth, with extraordinary bitterness. "*That* is her letter," and she pointed to the letter lying on the floor ; "the letter in which she proclaims her great dishonor !"

Colonel Forth stooped down, and picked up the letter with his shaking hands, and when he had read it he cursed her, and the day she had been born. His rage was, indeed, something terrible to witness. His face grew livid, the veins in his neck swelled, and his eyes seemed starting from their sockets. His words cannot be written here ; he was a man of violent temper, and he now gave way to ungovernable fury. Ruth drew back, afraid and trembling, lest he should fall down dead before her, slain by the storm of passion which possessed him.

"Hush, father, hush," she said ; "nothing can mend it now."

Again Colonel Forth lifted up his hand and cursed his

eldest born, asking that the blackest fate might overtake her, and that her evil deeds might recoil on her own bosom.

"And Kenyon?" he said, "my friend; the man who risked his life for mine—who will tell him?"

"Someone must," said Ruth with her pallid trembling lips; "would we had found her dead, father—would we had found her dead!"

"She is dead to me," answered Colonel Forth, darkly and sternly; "from this hour I have but one daughter—you, my poor girl."

He put out his hand, and as Ruth took it she burst into a sudden storm and passion of tears, which seemed to rend her slender frame, and the violence of her emotion helped to compose Colonel Forth.

"You are not to blame," he said, as he helped his daughter to a chair and rang for water. "My dear, you will make yourself very ill; does Audley know?"

"No!" sobbed Ruth, "and what will he care? Oh! you don't know all, father; all the misery I have gone through, all I have borne for *her*."

These words were not reassuring; but Ruth became so ill that Colonel Forth grew absolutely alarmed, and sent the servant over to the Fort for Dr. Murray, and when the young Scotchman arrived he saw at once that something terrible had happened.

"I am afraid you have had bad news," he said, sympathisingly.

"Shameful news, you mean," answered Colonel Forth, sternly. "But don't speak of it; give Ruth something to soothe her."

Then Dr. Murray understood that the riddle of Mrs. Kenyon's disappearance was solved, and that she had left her home with Sir Arthur Beaton. There had been many suspicions at the Fort that this was the case, during the last two days, and Kenard Seaforth had felt most acutely for Ruth, but had shrunk from seeing her, lest she should question him, fearing that his answers might only add to her anxiety and pain. In his own mind he had felt almost certain from the first that Mrs. Kenyon had fled with Beaton, but he naturally had kept this opinion to himself.

But when Dr. Murray returned to breakfast at the Fort, Frances Kenyon's name was bandied around with many a

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scoff and jest. They called her "Jezebel," having caught this name from Audley ; and Sir Arthur was a young fool, they said ; and old stories against Frances Forth were raked up, which had been forgotten or ignored against the mistress of Sudley Park, when she had entertained and smiled in her stately home.

Seaforth listened impatiently, and soon left the breakfast-table, for he had heard from Dr. Murray of Ruth's bitter distress and illness, and his heart felt very sore. He believed that Frances had parted him from Ruth, and he had never liked her ; but he could not laugh and jest over what he knew would fall as an overwhelming blow on Colonel Kenyon, and on her young sister ; and he was sorry too for Beaton, believing that the step he had taken would prove for him a very miserable one.

In the meanwhile, Colonel Forth had gone upstairs and told Audley, as he saw Ruth was quite unfit to do so. Audley received the news with an unmoved countenance and a little shrug.

"You must have been prepared for this," he said.

"I was not !" almost shouted Colonel Forth. "But please to remember, Major Audley, that from this day she is dead to me ; Ruth is my only daughter, and her sister's shameful conduct has nearly broken her heart."

"She at least was prepared," said Audley, calmly, "for I told her."

"She is very ill," said Forth, sullenly, and strode out of the room without another word. He had never liked Audley, and Ruth's words that "he did not know all the misery she had suffered" kept rankling in his mind.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

MORE BITTER THAN DEATH.

WHEN Audley was carried downstairs about eleven o'clock in his invalid chair, to his great surprise he found Ruth standing in the dining-room in her hat and jacket.

"Where are you going?" he asked, sharply.

She made no reply until the two men, his servant and a soldier who had carried him, had left the room. Then, as

the door closed behind them, she went nearer Audley, and he saw her face was deadly pale; and her eyes red-rimmed and heavy with recent tears.

"I am going to Colonel Kenyon's," she said, in a low tone of intense pain.

"You are not fit to go," answered Audley. "Your father should go."

"He *cannot* tell him. Do you not understand?"

"Well, I must say Madam Jezebel has made it rather hot for us all! I tell you what it is, Ruth. I mean to be out of this place at once; this disgusting business has settled that question."

She did not speak, but went to the window as if she were watching for something or some one.

"How are you going to Sudley?" asked Audley, looking round.

"My father will go with me in a cab. Ah! here he is."

"I think it is folly your going at all."

"I must; hush! say nothing to my father. He is greatly upset."

And when Colonel Forth came into the room, Audley thought it well not to do so, for there was a look of savage anger on Forth's face, and a dangerous light glowing in the pale eyes beneath the shaggy light brows. The wrong done to his old friend had cut him to the quick, and had Audley said anything to irritate him he would have turned on him like a tiger.

"Are you ready?" asked Forth, brusquely, looking at Ruth.

"Yes," she answered, almost below her breath; and without another word, and a brief nod to Audley, he offered his arm to his daughter, and led her to the cab waiting outside.

It was a hoar frost, and each leafless bough in the hedges was white with rime and glistening in the sun, as the father and daughter drove towards Sudley on their dreary errand, each heart thronged with the most bitter thoughts. They were quite silent for some time, and then Colonel Forth said suddenly and savagely—

"I would rather be going out to be shot!" And the old soldier would no doubt have rather faced a hundred bullets than have gone to speak of his daughter's shame, to the man who had been the one friend he had ever really

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cared for and to whom he was absolutely indebted for life itself.

And as they neared the noble home, where Colonel Forth had gone but a few months ago to welcome its new mistress with such pride and pleasure, a groan absolutely broke from his bitten lips, and he put his head out of the window and hastily told the driver of the cab to stop.

"Look here, Ruth, I *can't* do it!" he said hoarsely, addressing his daughter the next moment. "*I can't* face him until he knows; I'll get out here, and you go on and tell him, and I'll follow—it's enough to drive a man mad to think of it!"

Ruth made no remonstrance about the selfishness of this proposal, and Colonel Forth quickly got out of the cab and told the driver to go on. And so Ruth proceeded on her way, trying to frame in words the black and bitter news she was carrying to the noble-hearted man who was already bowed down with grief, but not with shame.

When she reached the hall door she had scarcely voice to ask the servant if his stricken master was at home. "Yes," she was told, "the Colonel was in the library;" and thither her trembling feet conveyed her, and she heard her name announced, and as the words "Mrs. Audley" fell on Colonel Kenyon's ears, he raised his head, which was lying on his hands on the table before him in an attitude of utter dejection.

But as he heard Ruth's name he started to his feet, and went forward to meet her with an eager look on his worn features, pitiable to witness, and Ruth's tear-stained eyes fell before his gaze.

He grasped her hand, and knew in a moment she was the bearer of ill news.

Twice Ruth tried to speak, but words failed her, and she stood there, dumb with the agony of her soul.

"For God's sake, speak!" he cried, in broken accents. "What do you know?"

Then Ruth's tongue was loosed.

"I have heard from her," she said, in a low, passionate, concentrated voice; "she has disgraced herself and us—she is with Sir Arthur Beaton."

Colonel Kenyon listened to these words, understood them, and for a moment the blood rushed to his pallid

face, dyed it crimson, and then it suddenly paled, and an instant later he fell forward with his face prone upon the floor.

Ruth screamed and ran to his assistance, but saw that he was senseless. She then rang the bell violently ; and so it happened that as Colonel Forth entered the courtyard at Sudley he met one of the grooms galloping out of it in hot haste, and on inquiring what was the matter, he was told that Colonel Kenyon had been taken suddenly and violently ill, and that the groom was going for the doctor.

This news was terrible to the man who heard it ; to the man who knew too well what had stricken down his friend ; and when a few moments later Forth entered the library, the sight there utterly overcame him.

Colonel Kenyon was lying on a couch, to which he had been lifted, his death-like face, white, stony, immovable ; and seeing this, with a hoarse cry Forth rushed forward and grasped one of the cold and nerveless hands which Ruth was rubbing with spirit, as she knelt, white-lipped, by his side, while the butler was endeavoring to restore circulation in the other.

Colonel Kenyon's throat was bare, for they had taken off his collar and tie, and his waistcoat was opened, and he looked old, changed, and white-haired, as if the rigid hand of death had laid its icy fingers on his generous heart and stopped its beats for ever.

"My God ! Is he gone?" cried Forth, bending over him, and the butler answered :

"Ay, it's killed him, I'm afraid, sir," and these words were a fresh stab to Forth, who tried in vain to find any pulse in the wrist he held.

"Hush, he will come round," said Ruth ; and she rose and began bathing his brow with water and trying other means to restore him.

But until the doctor came he showed no signs of life, and with the utmost difficulty was restored to consciousness ; and when at last he did look in Ruth's face, she understood that mute and agonised appeal.

"He will be better alone," she said, looking at the anxious group standing round Colonel Kenyon's couch. "I will stay with him, father ; and the doctor had better stay in the house."

So the others went silently away, and Ruth knelt down and kissed one of Colonel Kenyon's hands.

"Try not to think of it," she said, gently; "try to sleep."

He did not speak for nearly an hour afterwards, and then he said in a low and very feeble tone,—

"Ruth, let everything that belonged to her be sent away—everything. Never let her name be mentioned to me again—to me she is dead."

"She is dead to all of us," answered Ruth; "she is utterly unworthy."

Colonel Kenyon was very ill for many days after this; ill when all that had belonged to the beautiful woman who had broken his brave heart was carried quietly away from the roof she had forsaken, and forwarded to her in Paris by Ruth, with a few bitter words. And her name was never again spoken to him by any of the household, for they knew that a darker shadow than death had fallen on it for *him*, and that she who had been his pride and joy had left his hearth doubly desolate, and filled his genial life with gloom.

But he was always very gentle and kind, especially to the young sister of her who had wounded him so sorely, and to his old friend, Colonel Forth. But the sight of his changed face was a constant worry to Forth, though he went almost daily to Sudley, and spent hours with the shattered man who had suddenly aged and ceased to have any pleasure or interest in his former occupations.

Ruth remained with him more than a week after his first seizure, and then returned to Headfort, having despatched all Frances' dresses and jewels to her in Paris with the following letter:—

"By Colonel Kenyon's request, who is very ill, I forward to-day everything that belonged to you at Sudley, as there your name has never again to be mentioned; neither do my father nor I ever wish to hear from you or see you again.

"RUTH AUDLEY."

She shed no tears as she penned these hard words, for her heart was full of bitter anger against Frances, and she told herself that they would not cost her a pang. But they did; and as Frances read them she began to realise, perhaps for the first time, that she had thrown away much

that she could never regain. Sir Arthur Beaton found her in tears, and true to her nature, she pointed to Ruth's letter, with these characteristic words :

"Read that, and see what I've lost for you."

The speech wounded him, for he was sensitive and proud, and he thought it was ungenerous of Frances to say this. He had not told her of a letter which he had received only the day before from his mother ; a letter full of pain and reproach, in which Lady Beaton had called Frances hard names, and entreated her son to break off a connection that could only end in misery. Nor did he tell her of this letter now.

"You must let me atone for all," he said, and took her hand in his. But Frances, quick to perceive things, saw something in the expression of his face which warned her that she could not trifle as she had once done with her power over his heart.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

CHANGE.

WHEN Ruth returned to Headfort she found Audley more irritable and impatient even than usual.

"You have come back at last, then," was his greeting as she walked into the room where he lay smoking, and he held out his hand, which Ruth took.

"I really could not get away before," she answered ; "Colonel Kenyon was so ill, and—there was so much to do."

"Oh, I heard all about it," said Audley, throwing down his newspaper ; "all the gossip. Lady Hastings called on Monday and she told me of poor Kenyon's fit, or whatever it was, and how he asked you to forward Madame Jezebel's jewels and dresses to her—more fool he !"

"I am going to ask you something," said Ruth, with quivering lips ; "there at Sudley—*her* name is never to be again mentioned, and let this be so here also."

Audley shrugged his shoulders,

"What matter is it whether we talk of her—when everyone else does or will ?"

"At least it will spare me some pain," answered Ruth,

turning away ; and during the next few days she found she had enough pain to bear.

She was ashamed to go out and meet the glances of half-veiled pity and curiosity which met her on every side. Frances Kenyon's beauty, and her bright lively manner, and her husband's wealth and position, had made her the most talked of person in and round Headfort, ever since her marriage. And now her flight, and Colonel Kenyon's illness, were the theme of every tongue. The Rev. John Appleby called when he heard that Mrs. Audley had returned to High Street, and when Ruth went into the drawing-room to receive him, he pressed her hand with a semi-sympathising sigh.

"Ah," he said, "what a trial ! My dear young lady, I have grieved for you all more than I can express."

Imagine how painful this was to the sensitive, sore-hearted Ruth ! She tried to change the conversation, but the Vicar wanted to hear all about it, so that he might go to some other house and say, "Poor Mrs. Audley told me indeed. Ah, it's too sad—a fatal step !"

"And Colonel Kenyon?" he enquired. "Is he more reconciled? I heard the blow nearly killed him."

"He is a little better," answered Ruth ; "but please, Mr. Appleby, do not talk of it."

"Shall we not? Well, my dear young lady, I only meant you to understand how my heart glows with sympathy for you. Now I fully believe that you were perfectly ignorant of this unhappy affair until the final catastrophe ; though there have been sad scandals, of course—sad scandals ;" and he shook his head.

The Vicar's call proved so painful altogether to Ruth, that she gave the servants orders that she was not at home to any visitors in future ; but she regretted she had done this when the next day she found Captain Seaforth's card lying on the table.

"Did Captain Seaforth ask to see Major Audley?" she enquired of the servant.

"No, ma'am ; he enquired if he could see you, but I said you were seeing no one. He did not ask for the Major."

Ruth felt very much inclined to say, "If he comes again I shall see him," but she suppressed the words. A strange resolve had come into her heart ; had come as she

looked on Colonel Kenyon's death-like face when he lay stricken down by Frances' shame ; when she had re-read her heartless words, and realised that the sister for whom she had sacrificed her own happiness and Kenard Seaforth's was totally unworthy.

"He shall know now why I did it," she thought. "She has spoilt our lives, but he shall know the truth."

Audley noticed a change in the expression of her face after she returned from Sudley ; it was harder, stronger. "She has lost her idol," he thought, scornfully, remembering how passionately Ruth had always defended Frances from his attacks. But he could not look into Ruth's heart, nor know of what she had determined.

He had taken a house, while she was away, at South Kensington for three months, and was now eager to be gone from Headfort.

"I hope I'll soon see the last of this horrid hole," he said to Ruth, with a darkling brow. He hated, indeed, to think of what had happened to him here, and he had seen a little start, almost a little shudder, pass over Lady Hastings' face when she had first looked at him after his accident. He was in truth greatly disfigured, the lower part of his jaw being seamed and scarred in so terrible a manner, that all his good looks had disappeared. And this was an absolute calamity to so vain a man, and he hoped that perhaps the doctors in town might be able to do something for him. He determined, therefore, to leave Headfort at once, and told Ruth she must be ready to go in less than a week after her return from Sudley.

Ruth had thus many arrangements to make, and had a restless desire also to see Kenard Seaforth. He had called three days after he knew she was at home again, for he had heard from Major Cary that the Audleys were leaving Headfort, and he wished to see her before she left, and felt hurt and heartsore when he was refused admission.

But the next day he accidentally met her while he was walking down the village. Ruth was in black, and wore a thick gauze veil, and was on her way to her father's house to see after some packing cases, but when she saw Seaforth she at once stopped and held out her hand.

"I was sorry you would not see me when I called yesterday," he said, as he clasped it. "I hear you are leaving Headfort soon."

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"In two days ; we go on Thursday," answered Ruth, in a low tone ; and then she looked straight up in Seaforth's face, and something in her expression half startled him, it was so earnest, so intense.

"You have something to say to me—to tell me?" he said, as if he had read her thoughts.

"Yes, I wished to see you."

"May I turn with you now, then?"

"I was going to my father's ; he is not there, he is at Sudley ; but will you go in with me for a few minutes?"

"Yes," and Seaforth knew by her manner that though Ruth spoke so quietly, she was really in a state of strong excitement.

He unlatched the little gate for her when they reached Colonel Forth's house, and together they walked through the garden, and Seaforth looked round and sighed.

"It seems changed somehow," he said, thinking of the sunny days and eves when he had lingered here by the side of his young love.

"It was summer then," answered Ruth, and nothing more, for there was no need of words. A neglected garden lay around them ; the weeds had grown apace after Ruth left home, and now lay prone upon the damp ground, dead and half-frozen, amid leafless stalks of fuchsias and rose trees. The very strings with which Ruth had trained her nasturtiums and sweetpeas hung dangling in the wintry air, and the whole place had a forlorn appearance which struck them both.

But Ruth did not pause to talk of it. She rang the door bell, and when the servant opened it she led Seaforth into the little dining-room in which there was no fire, as the Colonel was not expected home until the next day.

"How cold it is," she said, with a shiver, and she bade the maid light the fire ; and as the feeble flames began to rise, she told her to go, and thus Seaforth and Ruth were alone.

Then Ruth looked in his face, and she saw he had grown very pale.

"I have something to say to you," she said, abruptly, nervously, as though she were forcing the words from her quivering lips. "Do you remember asking me, urging me, to tell you why I was forced to let you know our marriage could not be?"

"You may be sure I remember."

"I could not tell you then," went on Ruth, her voice vibrating with the strong feelings of her heart. "My lips were sealed then by love—a love that is gone!" And she clasped her hands together.

"You mean for your sister?" said Seaforth in a low tone, casting down his eyes.

"Yes, for Frances, for whom I had given more than life! You know how she has repaid us; how she has brought shame on us, and broken her husband's heart."

"Do not pain yourself by speaking of her."

"But I must—Kenard. Until I knew you I had loved no one in all my life but her; her wrongs were mine, and to save her good name I risked my own."

"I do not understand you."

Ruth began to walk up and down the room in a state of violent agitation.

"Spare me part of a shameful story," she said in a broken voice; "let it be enough for me to tell you that to screen Frances I did what I never should have done—and—and Major Audley discovered this, and his price for keeping the secret was——"

"You mean he forced you to marry him? The brute! the coward!" interrupted Seaforth, passionately.

"He forced me to marry him," went on Ruth, in a low concentrated tone, "though I went down on my knees and prayed for mercy—but he had none. He knew we were engaged; he knew I cared for you, but he held to his bargain; unless I married him he would disgrace Frances; and Frances prayed me for her sake to do what was worse than death!"

"Oh! my poor girl!" said Seaforth, deeply moved, and going near her and laying his hand on her arm. "Now I understand, Ruth—this was why you gave me up?"

"Do you remember when I sent for you to say good-bye?" said Ruth, tears rushing into her eyes. "I told you I had no choice, and I had none, for Frances said she would die if this were known, and I knew Audley had no pity! It was cruel, too cruel—and after I did this—after I married him and wrecked my whole life to save her, you know what she has done?"

"She is worthless—utterly worthless," said Seaforth, with strong indignation.

"I meant to keep the secret till I died; but she has broken all ties, all honor, and the bitterest thing of all to me was what *you* must have thought—how you must have scorned and despised me—yet I was forced to bear this!"

"I suffered very much, Ruth," said Seaforth, turning away his head.

"I saw your face was changed when we met that day at Lady Hastings', just as I suppose you saw the change in mine. But you know now—I could not go away without telling you—I am glad you know."

Seaforth made no answer; he went to the window and stood looking vaguely out at the neglected garden, his heart throbbing with contending emotions.

"If Audley had not been as he is," he presently said, savagely, "I should have shot him."

"I have been sorry for him since his dreadful accident," answered Ruth, with some pity in her tone; "he has suffered so much—but it was a cruel wrong. I warned him before our marriage that only misery could come of it, and only misery has come."

"And what are you going to do?"

Ruth hesitated, and her fair face flushed.

"I shall try to arrange to live with my father shortly," she said. "I am not afraid of Major Audley now."

"And your whole life is wrecked!" said Seaforth, impetuously.

Ruth smiled sadly.

"I am used to that—and I am not alone. Look at Colonel Kenyon."

"I warned Beaton, but he was infatuated with your sister."

Ruth did not speak, she stood gazing at the feeble fire, her profile turned so that Seaforth could see the delicate lines and soft pale coloring; and as he watched her, a strong and passionate wish rose in his heart to say words which he felt at this moment it would be ungenerous to utter.

He moved restlessly, and as he did so Ruth turned and looked at his agitated face; looked at it with her pathetic grey eyes, where all the sorrow and sadness of her young life was so plainly written.

"Are you going home when you go on your long leave?" she asked, quietly.

"For part of the time, but I feel very unsettled ; I still think of exchanging and going out to India."

There was another silence ; an embarrassed silence, and then Seaforth said abruptly—

"I shall be in town shortly ; may I call to see you, and will you give me your address?"

She told him the number of the house in Longridge-road, South Kensington, that Audley had taken, and Seaforth wrote it down on a card.

"I shall see you there then," he said ; "and—Ruth, I want to say something—thank you for trusting me, as you have done."

"It seemed to me but right to clear myself in your eyes—I could not bear any longer for you to think of me as you must have done."

"It was only at first—not after we met again—but at first it did seem very hard."

"It was hard and bitter indeed!"

Again the temptation to tell her how dear she was to him still rushed into Seaforth's heart, but with an effort he forced back the words. She looked indeed so fair and sad as she stood there, with her black veil thrown back, that he felt he could no longer trust himself to control his feelings.

"Good-bye," he said, nervously and quickly, and caught one of her hands in both of his, "God bless you ;" and the next moment he had left the room. And after he was gone, Ruth remained a moment or two pale and trembling, and then she also quitted the room, going to the small one upstairs which used to be her own before her miserable marriage with Audley.

And as soon as she was there she locked the door and gave way to the passionate pain which rent her heart. All the old love came over her like a deep flood, and the pleasant, good-looking face of Kenard Seaforth as she had first seen it—as she had just seen it—seemed so unutterably dear to her.

"Kenard! Kenard! Why were we parted?" she sobbed out in her bitter pain, rocking herself to and fro in uncontrollable emotion, and recalling the bright hopes, born but to die, that had once filled her life. "And for *her*!" she thought, with indignant anger, starting to her feet as she remembered for whose sake she had given

up happiness; remembered how ill her love had been repaid.

And as she wailed and wept, the young man with whom she had just parted returned to his quarters at the Fort, with a heart almost as deeply agitated as her own. Kenard Seaforth, impulsive and generous-minded, was profoundly touched by Ruth's confession, by her self-sacrifice and her love. He understood it all now; understood the poor girl's feelings when she had told him she was forced to give him up; when she had laid her wet cheek against his, and pressed her farewell kiss upon his lips.

"To save her vile sister from disgrace," he muttered, as he strode up and down his room, deeply moved. "And that cur—that coward," he thought darkly, "to take such a base advantage. What shall I do? Ruth cannot remain with Audley—she shall not!"

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

ROSE HAYWARD.

RUTH did not see Kenard Seaforth again to speak to before she left Headfort, after their interview at her father's house. On the following day she went with Colonel Forth to Sudley to bid Colonel Kenyon good-bye, and the sight of his sad face and bowed head painfully affected her.

And the change in the whole house; the silence and the gloom in the rooms that had rung with laughter and gay words, was very striking. It was as when in some chamber under the roof-tree a familiar face lies still and cold. But the shadow at Sudley was deeper even than grief; was darker than our sorrow for those who speak to us no more. It was the shame, the disgrace, that Frances Kenyon had left behind her, that made everything so bitter to the husband who had loved her too well; to her father, and Ruth, when they met and parted in her forsaken home.

They never mentioned her name. Colonel Kenyon had instructed his lawyer to apply for a divorce as soon as one could be obtained, but he had done this in silence—not even taking his old friend, Colonel Forth, into his confidence. As for Colonel Forth, who had always

been of a gloomy and dissatisfied disposition, as he strode up and down the deserted walks in the grounds at Sudley, the savage anger in his heart against his eldest daughter was reflected on his stern visage ; for, to do him justice, the wrong done to his friend had cut deeper into his sour heart than any former misfortune of his own.

So it was a melancholy visit, this last one that Ruth paid to Sudley, before she quitted Headfort, where she had suffered so much. But Colonel Kenyon was very kind and gentle in his manner to her, and kissed her on her forehead when she went away.

"Come and stay with me, my dear, whenever you like," he said, and then turned his head quickly aside, but Ruth heard the heart-wrung sigh that followed his kindly words.

"I should like to come," she said, and tightly clasped his hand ; "and my father will often see you."

"Yes," answered Colonel Kenyon, and thus they parted ; but as Ruth drove home she thought of what even Frances would have felt had she seen the expression on the face of the man whose heart she had broken.

And the next day Ruth left Headfort. She paid no other farewell visits, it would have been too painful for her to have done so, though Audley wished her to call on Lady Hastings.

"I cannot," she answered, briefly, and he shrugged his shoulders and said nothing more.

And thus they went away, Colonel Forth going to the station to see them off, a saloon carriage having been engaged for Audley's use, and Dr. Murray accompanied them to town.

It was known, of course, at the Fort the time they were leaving, and Seaforth stood with a gloomy brow at one of the mess-room windows and watched them go. He saw Audley carried out, and then he saw Colonel Forth fussing and fuming about the luggage, and presently Ruth came out and stood a moment and looked up at the Fort, with her wistful eyes, and then her father helped her into the cab which shortly drove away, and with a restless sigh Seaforth watched it until it disappeared.

He left Headfort on leave the next day, but went home in a very disturbed condition of mind. His mother, who expected him, as she clasped him in her arms, saw at

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once something was wrong. She hoped he had forgotten his disappointment about Ruth Forth, and she and the General mutually congratulated each other, when they had heard of Mrs. Kenyon's elopement, that Kenard had had nothing to do with such a family.

"But what can be the matter now?" thought the tender little woman, full of maternal solicitude, with her gentle eyes fixed on her son's somewhat worn and altered face.

"I have a young lady here to help to amuse you, my dear," she said, with an anxious smile; "such a pretty girl, Kenard."

"What a nuisance, mother!" answered the ungrateful Kenard; "I wanted to be quiet; I can't be bothered with a girl."

"Wait until you see her," said Mrs. Seaforth, who had invited Miss Rose Hayward to stay with her on purpose that Kenard might fall in love with her.

She had many advantages in Mrs. Seaforth's eyes, as well as being bright, young and pretty. She was the daughter of a very old friend, for Mrs. Seaforth had known her mother in her girlhood, and lately, when Major Hayward's battery of Artillery had become stationed in General Seaforth's district, these two had met again after not having seen each other for twenty years.

Rose Hayward was a bright, fair-haired girl, full of life and vivacity, and reminded Mrs. Seaforth so much of her mother in her young days, that she at once, in her gentle, placid way, took a great fancy to the girl, and, like a true woman, immediately began thinking of a suitable husband for her.

"Perhaps my Kenard might like her," she thought more than once, pensively looking at the pretty lively face of Rose Hayward. And her Kenard being expected on leave, she invited Rose to stay with her at Woodside, and thus Kenard, when he arrived home, found a young lady under his father's roof.

They met at dinner, and Rose was very much disappointed to find Captain Seaforth so quiet.

"He is good-looking, but decidedly slow," she wrote to her mother the next day; for she was a girl accustomed to receive a great deal of attention, and Kenard Seaforth did not seem inclined to pay her any. Her lively sallies fell on indifferent ears, and her bright smiles were so much

wasted, that instead of going into the drawing-room after dinner, Seaforth retired into the study to smoke, and sat there, moodily thinking of the sad fate of Ruth Forth, instead of the bright blue eyes of his mother's friend.

But Rose, not having much to amuse herself with at Woodside Hall, determined the next day to try to (as she expressed it) "draw out Captain Seaforth." She came down to breakfast bewitchingly dressed in some soft, dark blue material, which unmistakably suited her fair skin and bright golden wavy hair. And she was so sunny, so charming, that it seemed absolutely bearish not to answer her pleasantly, and Kenard soon found himself drawn into a lively conversation, and had promised to ride with her in the afternoon before the meal was ended.

And Rose prided herself on her slender figure and good seat. Not to admire her was indeed impossible, for she was so good-natured and pretty; and she mirthfully informed Kenard during their ride that she was very glad to have this opportunity of seeing a little more of him.

"You know," she said, smilingly, "an ideal Captain Seaforth has been presented to my mind's eye for the last fortnight by Mrs. Seaforth, but of course I knew—" And she nodded archly.

"Of course you knew it was a flattering picture?" answered Seaforth, also smiling.

"Mothers always do imagine their sons perfection, don't they?"

"So they say; I am very sorry for your disappointment."

"Oh! but I made allowance for a mother's partiality," laughed Miss Rose; "and really," she added, demurely, "her description of you was not so very much out of the way."

Kenard laughed heartily at this, and the two young people were quite good friends before they returned to Woodside; and Kenard went into the drawing-room after dinner on this second evening at home, and talked to Rose Hayward and his mother, while the General read his newspaper. And the next day very much the same thing happened, and the next. It prevented Kernard brooding over Ruth's wrongs, at all events, having this lively girl constantly beside him. But he did not forget the sweet, sad face of his first love; and after he had been about a

fortnight at Woodside it began to dawn on Rose Hayward's mind that there was a secret in Captain Seaforth's life—a secret which made him really sad, though he tried to hide this.

"I wonder what it is!" she thought; and one dismal wet day, she went into the study, where she knew Kenard was, under the excuse of seeking a book, and found him standing by the fire, with a very depressed expression on his good-looking face.

"I came for a novel," she said. "I hope I have not disturbed you," she added, as Kenard rose.

"Oh, no; I was just sitting sulking."

"And what have you to sulk about?" asked Miss Hayward, in her frank, bright way, going up to the fire, and holding one of her small feet close to the bars.

Kenard sighed restlessly.

"Oh, everyone has something, I suppose," he said.

"No, I have not; not yet, at least."

"Well, let us hope that you may never have, then."

The pretty girl now drew a chair to the fire and deliberately sat down on it.

"I wish you would tell me," she said, half in jest, half in earnest, fixing her blue eyes on the young man's gloomy face, "what your trouble is—if you have one."

"Well, it's not only my own trouble that worries me."

"A woman's trouble, then?"

"I cannot tell you, Miss Hayward."

"You mean you won't?"

"No, I could not tell you without dishonor."

"Ah!"

And the girl drew her lips tightly together, and thought she understood. She had got to like Kenard during the time they had spent under the same roof, and the idea that he cared for someone else was one of those vague disappointments which women so often hide. She changed the conversation; she talked in her usual lively strain, though the words were a little forced, and presently she left Kenard alone, and went up to her own room to think.

"He cares for someone he cannot marry—some married woman most likely," she thought. "Ah, what a pity; he is such a nice fellow."

Kenard on his part had been slightly disturbed by Rose Hayward's manner during their brief interview, and her

query had brought more acutely before him the memory of Ruth's sorrow and love. It is a difficult thing for a man, when constantly thrown with a girl like Rose, to entirely escape the power of her fascinations, and Mrs. Seaforth had noticed with secret delight that her darling son had been looking brighter during the last few days.

"I think he likes Rose," she had confided to the General, but she had not met with much encouragement.

"Nonsense! Can't a young man speak civilly to a pretty girl without you fancying all sorts of folly? I beg, Lucy, you'll not put any such idea into the girl's head."

Mrs. Seaforth was a very submissive, gentle little woman, but she was also most anxious that her boy should marry, believing that a charming girl like Rose would be a shield and buckler to him among the pitfalls of life. She, therefore, one morning, when walking round the circular avenue in front of the house, with her arm through her son's, began to talk of Rose in a manner which allowed Kenard very speedily to understand the drift of her conversation.

"You admire her, don't you, dear?" she said, looking up in Kenard's face with her soft, faded, tender eyes.

"Yes, I do; she's a very pretty girl, and very bright."

"But it is not only her beauty, dear, or her pretty manner that I like, it is the great goodness and sweetness of her heart. She is her mother over again, and with all her sprightly ways, Alice Hayward has been the most devoted wife I have ever known."

"Then Kenard understood what his mother was thinking of, and he therefore made no remark.

"And Rose, I am sure, would be just as devoted," continued Mrs. Seaforth, warming with her subject, "if she were to marry any one she cared for."

"Very likely," said Kenard, repressively; and Mrs. Seaforth was obliged to confess in her own mind that his manner had disappointed her.

Her words, at all events, had made Kenard ask himself if his manner to Miss Hayward had given any ground for his mother's idea. And the loyalty of his heart told him that to trifle with a girl's affections, when his love was not his own to give, was unjustifiable, and he therefore quietly made up his mind to leave Woodside while Miss Hayward continued a guest there.

He announced this decision at breakfast the day after Rose had asked him in the study what his trouble was ; and a feeling of delicacy prevented him looking in the girl's face when he spoke the words.

"Leaving to-morrow, Kenard !" echoed Mrs. Seaforth, in absolute consternation.

"Yes, I am obliged to run up to town for a few days," he answered ; and then he did glance at Rose, and saw her delicate complexion had flushed crimson, though as he looked she grew as quickly pale.

But she soon recovered herself, and talked even a little more than usual during the rest of the meal, hiding her disappointment very gaily ; so much so, that had it not been for that sudden blush and pallor, Kenard would have told himself he had probably been quite mistaken about her feelings. As it was, he kept to his determination, and left Woodside the next day, parting in friendly fashion with the pretty girl who was his mother's guest.

"You will be back in a day or two ?" asked Mrs. Seaforth, anxiously, before they parted.

"I shall let you know ; I shall not be very long," he answered, evasively, and something in his manner made Rose think he meant to stay away longer than he said.

He went direct to town, and as he journeyed there he naturally thought much of Ruth ; thought of her with an unsettled purpose in his heart. The conduct of Audley had seemed more shameful to him every time he had thought of it during his stay at Woodside. He remembered the letter to announce his marriage to Ruth which Audley had written to him there ; the letter in which Audley had told him he was to be married in a fortnight, as neither he nor Miss Ruth Forth were inclined to wait. And now when Seaforth knew the truth, these words filled the young man's heart with passionate anger and disgust. He felt he had been robbed of Ruth ; that Audley's conduct had put him outside the pale of any consideration or duty ; and he meant to see Ruth, and leave the future in her hands.

"My poor darling !" he thought tenderly, "why should her whole life be sacrificed to that brute ? why should he any longer bruise her tender heart ?"

Yet he had not made up his mind to any plan of action. He shrank even from the thought that would rise before

him. But he would see her ; and the second day after his arrival in town he drove to the house in Longridge-road, South Kensington, the address of which Ruth had given him.

Audley's old servant opened the door, and, of course, knowing Seaforth well by sight, received him with a smile.

"The Major and Dr. Murray were out," he said ; "but Mrs. Audley was at home," and he proceeded to usher Seaforth upstairs, and showed him into the drawing-room.

It was a good-sized apartment, with heavy green brocade curtains dividing the front and inner rooms. The servant crossed the front room, followed by Seaforth, parted the curtains, and announced Seaforth's name. As he did so, with a sudden start and blush Ruth rose from before a small table, where she had been sitting, and hastily turned a photograph which lay on the table on its face.

"You !" she said agitatedly, holding out her hand, and as Seaforth took it he saw her eyes were stained and wet with tears.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

A BLOW.

RUTH's emotion was so evident that Seaforth could not overlook it, though he tried not to show this.

"I came to town on Thursday," he said nervously, still holding her hand, "and you know you said I might call."

"Yes," answered Ruth, struggling to hide her agitation, but conscious that her eyes were full of tears, and that her whole appearance must betray to Seaforth that he had found her in distress.

She turned away her head, and Seaforth went on talking, as we do when we wish to appear not to notice another's grief. He thought she had been thinking of her sister, and in a few moments Ruth had so far recovered herself as to be able to answer him. He had been staying at Woodside for a fortnight, he told her, but he did not tell her of the pretty girl whom he had left behind him there.

Presently he mentioned one of those tragedies which cross our daily lives, for ever reminding us of the dark and fiery passions lurking in the human heart. A girl had been murdered by her lover the night before, and the miserable details were in the daily papers.

"I daresay it is all in here," said Seaforth, rising from his seat and taking up a newspaper lying on the little table, before which Ruth had been sitting when he entered the room. He lifted up the paper quickly and carelessly, and one of the sheets caught on the photograph she had hastily laid on its face there, and the next moment it fell on the floor, and Seaforth, as he stooped to raise it, saw his own features; knew that Ruth had been shedding tears over the portrait he had given her long ago!

He did not look at her at first—he could not. A sudden tumultuous throbbing at his heart; an overpowering sensation he could not define—of joy, of temptation—swept over him, and he stood still, holding the photograph in his hand, feeling that this knowledge of her deep love was dearer to him even than he had thought.

Then he turned and saw Ruth standing with eyes downcast and crimsoned cheeks; saw that she understood his emotion, and saw, too, that there was no anger in her face, only a modest woman's tender shame.

He made a step forward; he took her hand.

"So you kept it?" he said in a low, agitated tone.

She looked up for a moment in his face, and he knew that she had kept it, and wept over it, and loved it, as if it had been a living thing.

"Ruth," he went on passionately, clasping her hand closer, "you told me once that because I loved you so I ought to try and help you to forget our love—but is this time not passed? Can we ever forget it? I feel that we never can."

Still Ruth did not speak; she stood there with heaving breast and trembling hands, scarcely realising how sweet his words were to her ears.

"We are not like other people, you know," continued Seaforth; "we were parted by one of the vilest actions on earth—You owe Audley nothing."

"That is true," said Ruth, with faltering tongue.

"I have thought of this all the time I was at home—ever since you told me the real reason why you threw me

over—and as we have been so shamefully treated by others, why should we think of them?”

“You mean——”

“Ruth, will you trust me? Do you remember how we used to talk about going out to India together, and living on my pay? Do you care for me enough to do this now?”

“Why do you ask?” said Ruth, with deep emotion. “Care for you! Shall I tell you how I cared, Kenard?”

“Yes, tell me, dear Ruth.”

“When Major Audley forced me to marry him,” continued Ruth, her voice trembling and broken by strong and passionate feeling, “I used to count the days and hours that lay between me and an abhorred fate! It was nothing else—I hated Audley with a hatred I cannot tell! But for Frances’ sake—because I loved her so—I stifled the feelings of my heart; I crushed back the words that for ever rose on my lips, to defy him and let him do his worst, for I should rather have died than taken the false oaths I did.”

“They *were* false, and so do not bind you.”

“God only knows how false they were, and they do not bind me—except for you.”

“For me?”

“Yes, Kenard, for *you*. Do you think I would ruin your life, and blight all your prospects for any selfish love of mine? You have a father and mother; do you think I would bring shame and pain to them, as Frances has brought to us?”

Seaforth winced, and cast down his eyes at the mention of his mother’s name.

“There would be no real happiness for us, Kenard, if we did what our hearts prompt us to do,” went on Ruth with great sadness. “None, none! There is no happiness where there is shame—and this would be shame, though you are too generous to realize it.”

“No, because we were tricked and cheated out of our honest love.”

“It was very true love, Kenard,” and Ruth held out her hand, which he eagerly took. “Do you remember how we used to sit together in the little garden and watch the sunsets? We were very happy then.”

“We can be happy again if you will.”

"Not as we were then—I had no thought then but of you—now there would be always a shadow between us."

"But Audley is nothing to you?"

"I have borne his name in the world, I have eaten his bread. We cannot ignore nor forget the past, however bitter it may have been."

"He deserves anything that could befall him, to force a young girl like you to marry him by unmanly threats, when he knew you were engaged to me, was the basest action—the action of a man who deserves to be publicly kicked out of the society of gentlemen!"

Kenard raised his voice angrily as he said the last words, and a slight noise in the front drawing-room failed to attract his attention. But Ruth heard it.

"Surely someone opened the room door?" she said, and she went to the closed curtains between the two rooms and looked out, but the front room was empty.

"I must have fancied it," she said a moment later, turning back.

"I heard nothing," answered Kenard, "not that I care if Audley himself heard what I said; my blood boils whenever I think of the man—base scoundrel that he is!"

"Hush! hush! Kenard."

At this moment again the front drawing-room door was apparently opened, and this time Kenard heard the sound; and an instant or two later the curtains were pushed aside, and Dr. Murray appeared between them.

"Ah, Seaforth, are you here?" he said, advancing with outstretched hand. "When did you come to town?"

"The day before yesterday," answered Seaforth, returning the young Scotchman's hand-grip.

"That's all right. We must see something of each other. Has Major Audley been in here, Mrs. Audley?" continued Dr. Murray, turning to Ruth. "I expected to find him here."

"No," said Ruth, and she grew a little pale.

"He's so improved," went on the young doctor, addressing Seaforth. "We've got him a splendid artificial leg, you know now, and he walks wonderfully well with it, doesn't he, Mrs. Audley?"

"Yes," answered Ruth, almost under her breath.

"He came in with me just now," said Murray, utterly unconscious he was saying anything to disturb his listen-

ers, "so he must be in the house. You should wait to see him, Seaforth; I dare say he'll be down directly."

"No, I must go now," said Seaforth, slowly; "I shall see you again," he added as he took Ruth's hand. "Do not forget what I have said."

She did not speak; she looked at him out of the depths of her grey and shadowy eyes.

"Well, if you will go, I'll walk down the street with you a bit; it's nice to see you again, old fellow," said Murray.

A minute or two later the young men had left the room together, and Ruth was alone. She sat wearily down on the chair before the little table, where she had been sitting when Seaforth arrived, gazing with a far-away look at his photograph. Of what was she thinking? Of his words, his love, and the dreary bondage of her own existence. Ah! it was dark and bitter to her to think that if she bade him go, that if he went to India alone, that she would drop out of his life; become perhaps like a half-forgotten dream.

But on the other hand—and her face flushed hotly—could she make her name a jest and a bye-word as Frances had done, and cast a shadow over his life and hers that could never pass away?

Her head fell low on the table before her, but an instant later she had raised it hastily. She had heard footsteps in the front room, and the next moment the curtains were thrust roughly aside, and Audley, with absolute fury depicted on his disfigured face, stood before her.

"Well, is he gone?" he said loudly and roughly—"your lover!"

"Captain Seaforth is gone," she answered rising.

"Captain Seaforth, indeed!" almost shouted Audley. "Ruth!" and he grasped her arm savagely, "you have told that man I forced you to marry me; told the story of your sister's shame?"

She stood facing him; growing pale to the lips, but never taking her eyes from his.

"Yes, I have told him," she said; "told him why I was forced to break my word to him."

"You have dared to do this!" said Audley, shaking her in his rage, with his fierce grip upon her arm. "I heard you! I heard what he said of me. You have disgraced yourself and me—you shall leave my roof this very day."

"I have long wished to do so—I shall gladly do so," answered Ruth, trying to pull her arm from his clutch. "I shall go to my father's."

"Or follow the example of your virtuous sister," said Audley, with a coarse and bitter laugh.

"No," and Ruth gave a little shudder, "I shall leave you—but alone."

"Oh! I dare say! But I'm done with you. A woman who could degrade herself to tell such a story to another man—to a lover—as you have done, shall be no wife to me!"

"And how did you degrade yourself?" asked Ruth, in a voice broken with indignant passion. "Think what you did! The base advantage you took of the miserable secret you never should have known?"

"I was a fool for my pains," said Audley darkly, and vindictively, "but I scarcely thought you would have repeated the pretty tale to Seaforth; scarcely thought you had fallen so low as that."

"I did it to clear myself to him."

"And what ought *he* to be to you?" cried Audley fiercely. At this moment his angry eyes fell on Seaforth's photograph which was still lying on the table, and as they did so a terrible expression passed over his face.

"So you have been exchanging portraits, have you?" he said with passionate bitterness, seizing the photograph, tearing it in two, and flinging it on the floor. "How dare you do so?" And giving way to uncontrollable passion, he struck a heavy blow on her face with his open hand.

"*There!* take that and be gone; I never wish to see your face again!" he cried, furiously; and as Ruth gave a cry and staggered forward, he turned and left the room, and Ruth sank down, pale and panting, on a chair that was near her.

It was all over then, and she would go, was her first thought. The insult he had offered her, the stinging pain on her cheek and eye, would be a sufficient excuse to her father for leaving Audley, and Ruth made up her mind at once to do so. She stooped down and picked up the torn photograph, and placed the severed portions in the bosom of her dress, and then feeling physically weak and faint with the excitement she had gone through, she tottered to her own room, and, having locked the door, began, when

she felt a little recovered, to gather together the few things she meant to take with her to her father's house.

Suddenly she remembered that she could not reach Headfort that night, and that she would be forced to sleep on the way. But she would not stay under Audley's roof; she would take her maid with her, who was a Headfort girl, and then even he, she thought scornfully, would be unable to blacken her name with unseemly words.

No sooner had she decided on this plan than she rang the bell, and when her maid answered it she told her she had been summoned unexpectedly to her father's, and that she must be ready to start in half an hour. The maid assented, knowing very well all the while that the "summons to her father's" was really a violent quarrel between the husband and wife. They had rightly guessed the cause also of the quarrel downstairs, for Audley, when he had returned to the house, had been told by his soldier-servant that Captain Seaforth was in the drawing-room, and the man was sharp enough to perceive the lowering brow with which this announcement was received.

Audley had always been jealous of Seaforth, and it flashed across his brain in a moment that if he went quietly into the front drawing-room, he might hear unseen part of the conversation going on in the back room, where Ruth usually sat.

Never did the old adage prove more true that "listeners seldom hear good of themselves," than in what happened to Audley during the next few minutes. Going as noiselessly as possible into the front room, he heard with a burning sense of shame, disgrace, and rage, words which struck his vain, passionate heart, like a sharp sword. He heard Seaforth say in his clear tones, "He deserves anything that could befall him; to force a young girl like you to marry him by unmanly threats, when he knew you were engaged to me, was the basest action; the action of a man who deserves to be publicly kicked out of the society of gentlemen."

It is almost impossible to describe the fury of Audley as this sentence fell on his tingling ears. He left the front room immediately, conscious he could not restrain himself if he remained, and conscious also that he could not deny the truth of Seaforth's words if he were called upon to do so,

He knew all then—knew that his wife hated him, that she loved Seaforth, and that she had confided to Seaforth this shameful story. Some pity almost might be felt for the man as he raged and swore in the room below ; as he saw his own cruel, unmanly conduct brought home to him so plainly ; as he understood too well now the cause of Ruth's persistent coldness and aversion to himself.

"She has always loved Seaforth." He repeated these words to himself again and again ; they stung him like scorpions ; they burned into his heart with fiery pain. And his own honor, his good name among men, where would it be if this story were known ? Audley felt so sure, so certain that Ruth would not betray her sister's secret, that he had never troubled himself to think of what might be the consequences if she did. And now Seaforth knew—Seaforth, who had been Ruth's lover, who might revenge himself if he chose by blackening Audley's character in the world.

As he paced backwards and forwards, with intense rage and shame in his heart, he heard Dr. Murray and Seaforth descending the staircase, and a minute later leave the house. Then, maddened, furious, he went up to Ruth, and the miserable scene which ended in a blow took place between them. Audley felt, indeed, now, nothing but hatred to the pale indignant woman whom he considered had betrayed him, and who stood before him avowing what she had done.

Then, after he had left her, with muttered curses on his lips, he again returned to the dining-room downstairs, but the miserable excitement which possessed him prevented his remaining there. He bade his servant call a cab, and drove down to his club, not returning to Longridge-road until a few minutes before eight o'clock, at which hour he usually dined.

He found a telegram from Dr. Murray awaiting him to tell him that Murray was going to dine with Seaforth ; and as he flung this indignantly on the floor, his eyes fell on a note placed on the mantel-piece in Ruth's handwriting.

Eagerly grasping this he tore it open, and read the following words :—

"I am leaving your house, and I shall never return to it. I will go direct to my father's, and am taking Watson with me.

"RUTH."

CHAPTER XL.

A TELEGRAM.

THE next day about twelve o'clock, Colonel Forth was sitting smoking in his little dining-room at Headfort, with a very grim expression on his sour visage.

He had been at Sudley the day before, and the sight of his old friend there now always depressed him, and made him wish in the bitterness of his heart that his eldest daughter had never been born into the world. And this was perhaps but natural when he looked at the face of the stern sad man, sitting alone under the roof she had dishonored. Colonel Kenyon had virtually closed his doors on everyone except Forth, and the two met, and passed hours together often almost in total silence.

"And that jade has done it all," Colonel Forth was thinking savagely, when he heard his garden gate click, and, going to the window, saw to his great surprise, his daughter Ruth walking towards the house, and the next moment the bell rang.

"Ruth! confound it, what has happened now?" he muttered, and at once proceeded to the little hall, where he found Ruth and her maid Watson just entering it.

"Why, Ruth, where have you sprung from?" he asked, holding out his hand, which she took silently.

Something in her manner startled him, and he hastily asked her to go into the dining-room, and shut the door on the two servants outside.

"Nothing the matter, is there?" he asked. "You have not heard anything of——"

He did not mention Frances' name, but Ruth understood his meaning.

"No," she said, "it is nothing about her. Father, I have left Major Audley; will you take me in?"

"Left Audley! Confound it, you don't mean you've had any row, surely!"

Ruth's answer was to take the thick veil off that she wore,

and then she pointed to her swollen cheek and blackened eye.

"He struck me," she said, in a low but determined voice; "after that I could not stay."

"Struck you! The brute!" cried the Colonel furiously; "and after you nursed him, and took care of him as you did!" Then suddenly, still looking at his young daughter, the expression of his face changed. "There is nothing underneath this, Ruth, surely?" he added anxiously. "You have given him no cause?"

Ruth's face suddenly grew crimson.

"I have not," she said; "do not be afraid."

"Then all I can say is, he ought to be ashamed of himself! But why did you ever marry such a fellow? That's what I never could make out."

Ruth gave no direct answer to this question.

"Some day, perhaps, you may know," she said; "for the present may I stay on with you?"

"Of course you may; what folly to ask. What will you take? You've had breakfast, I suppose?"

"I will have some tea, and go upstairs and lie down if I may," answered Ruth, "my head aches badly."

Colonel Forth rang for the tea, and ordered a fire to be lit in his daughter's bedroom, and otherwise showed some consideration for her comfort. He was really glad to have her back again, for a time at least, and he always had secretly disliked Audley; his manner when Frances disappeared having irritated him exceedingly, nor had he forgotten Ruth's words that he "did not know all she had gone through."

"The brute!" he kept muttering to himself, striding up and down the room in a rage, after Ruth had gone upstairs; "to strike the girl on her face like that—in one of his confounded tempers I suppose. But was there ever such an unlucky man in the world as I am?" went on his mental cogitations; "here both the girls have come to grief, and now that Ruth's returned on my hands, there will be some more gossip and scandal, I suppose."

In the meanwhile Ruth had gone back to the shabby little chamber which she had left at her ill-omened marriage. Oh, what a rush of thoughts swept over her as she remembered the last time she had slept there, and how she had dreamed of Kenard Seaforth, and in that shadowy dual life

of ours—the strange vision of the night—had promised that her heart would never change.

And she had seen him yesterday! She sat down and tried to realise what had happened; her separation from Audley; Kenard's words, which she knew might mean so much.

But no, no; she must not think of them, she presently told herself. Her life was dark and difficult, but she must try to bear it, for the wrong Audley had done could not be put away. She would stay with her father, and perhaps sometimes she might see Kenard; sometimes they might talk again in the little garden as they had done before.

Poor Ruth! There was something very girlish about her still, even after all her hard and bitter experience. And presently, after bathing her face, she began arranging her small room—for she was too restless to lie down—placing the furniture as it used to be; and, as she did this, naturally the memory of the beautiful sister who had wrought all this ill haunted her continually. She seemed to see Frances again pleading to her “for my sake” to marry Audley; to hear her words when she came to tell her that Colonel Kenyon had asked her to be his wife. It all came back to her, and this was the bitter end.

Almost at this very time Seaforth was hearing in town news which brought his mind to a sudden determination. When Dr. Murray had returned to Longridge-road the evening before, after dining with Seaforth at his club, he found Audley in a state of mind bordering on frenzy. After he had read Ruth's farewell words, he burst into a fit of furious rage, and then began drinking heavily, which did not tend to compose him; and when Murray entered the room where he was, the excited man told him enough of the painful story to shock and disgust the young doctor completely.

“What do you think?” shouted Audley; “my wife—the woman I married without a farthing—was talking against me to that scoundrel Seaforth. And that scoundrel was abusing me—do you hear? Abusing me in my own house, and no doubt making love to her! But I'm done with her; I've turned her out of the house, and she may go to the devil for anything I care,” and so on.

In this strain he continued raving, and Murray had the greatest difficulty in inducing him to go to bed. He told Murray that he had struck her on the face, and Murray had the good sense not to tell him what he thought of his conduct. At last he was prevailed upon to lie down, and soon fell into a heavy sleep, and when he had done this, Murray made inquiries about Mrs. Audley from the servants, and heard she had started for Headfort with her maid Watson.

The next day, therefore, as soon as he could leave Audley, who had made himself ill with excitement and brandy, Dr. Murray called on Seaforth, and told his story.

"What do you think, old fellow?" he said. "There was a tremendous row yesterday at Longridge-road, and you are at the bottom of it."

Seaforth's face flushed deeply as he listened to these words.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

Then Murray told him; he had found Audley "awfully on" when he had gone back last night, and Mrs. Audley had disappeared.

"He overheard you talking against him, he said, and heaps of folly besides; and the brute struck the poor little woman on the face——"

"*What!*" cried Seaforth, starting to his feet in strong excitement.

"He bragged of it, and it was true; for Hill, his servant you know, told me that her maid said Mrs. Audley was not fit to be seen, he had given her such a blow; and the servants are all thoroughly disgusted with him, and no wonder."

Seaforth did not speak for a moment; his indignation against Audley was too intense for words, and he stood pale and panting while Murray went on to describe Audley's condition.

"He's a brute," he said, "and she was always too good for him. Poor thing! she's had no end of trouble."

"And she has gone to her father's?" asked Seaforth, briefly.

"Yes, she and her maid; the old Colonel will be in a tremendous rage with Audley, I expect, for he's a bit of a fire-eater."

"Would it kill the cur to flog him?" said Seaforth, in a low, fierce tone.

"My dear fellow, you can't flog a man with one leg, who has just scraped through with his life after a dreadful accident. No; keep out of his way, that's the safest plan."

Again Seaforth was silent, and after a few more words Murray left him, and then Seaforth made a determination which he at once acted upon.

"He shall not strike her again, if I can protect her," he muttered to himself. "I'll see Crawford to-day and settle about the exchange."

Captain Crawford was an officer at home on sick leave, who was very anxious not to return again to India, and he and Seaforth had already frequently discussed the subject of an exchange; but now Seaforth had thoroughly made up his mind.

The exchange was very soon effected after this, and then, to the consternation of his parents, Seaforth wrote to Woodside to tell them he was going to India almost immediately. This news was a complete blow to them, and the General, who was a shrewd man, at once guessed that his son had some private reason for this sudden change.

"He has got into some trouble, I fear," he said to his wife; "he has never been the same lad since that absurd affair with that Miss Forth, who married Major Audley."

The poor little timid mother clasped her hands together in agitation.

"And I hoped he would marry Rose," she said, almost in tears, "and—I believe the poor girl likes him."

"She'll not break her heart, my dear; but all the same, I think I'll run up to town and see Kenard, and find out the reason for this extraordinary step."

And the General did "run up to town," and saw Kenard, but did not succeed in finding out the cause of his leaving England. He showed indeed so much reticence that the General was convinced that a woman was concerned in it, and after some hesitation, blurted out a plain question.

"I hope, Kenard, you are not going to do anything foolish?" he said, and Kenard's good-looking face turned crimson under his father's keen gaze.

"I do not understand you," he answered.

"My boy, when a man loses respectability and position for a woman's sake, ten to one he will soon learn to dislike that woman. This is what I mean by doing something foolish."

"We cannot judge for others, father."

"Then am I to understand you mean to break your mother's heart?" asked the General sternly.

"I hope not," said Kenard with some feeling; but on the whole the interview between father and son was far from satisfactory, and the General returned to Woodside in a very irritable condition of mind.

And after he had left town Seaforth despatched a telegram to Headfort. It was addressed to Mrs. Audley at Colonel Forth's house, and when he had sent it Seaforth felt as if he had taken a step in life from which there was no return.

It reached Ruth after she had been about three weeks with her father, and caused her much agitation and pain. It contained only a few simple words, but these to Ruth seemed full of meaning.

"I am starting for India almost immediately, and shall come down to Headfort to-morrow purposely to see you. I will call about five o'clock.

"KENARD SEAFORTH."

To an ordinary reader there did not seem much in this, but Ruth felt as she read the lines that a great crisis in her fate had come, and that she was about to be called upon to answer the question which Kenard had asked her in Longridge-road. And a struggle took place in her heart—a struggle strong and deep—for she loved Kenard with a love she was powerless to resist; but for the sake of this very love she told herself she must bid him go! Ah! it seemed very hard and bitter; these two had been so happy and so fond, and would have clung to each other in weal and woe with the faithfullest affection. And by no fault of their own, by the cruel selfishness of Audley, they had been forced to part. And the sting left in the wound was that their separation had done no good. Again and again Ruth repeated all this, as she sat with Seaforth's telegram clasped in her trembling fingers. And he would be there in a few hours; in a few hours she would have to part with him—or would he stay if she asked him?—ah, if he would only stay!

Her father was going to dine with Colonel Kenyon, and left early in the afternoon, and Ruth sat alone in the drawing-room with a fast-beating heart. Four o'clock

came, half-past four, and just about five the little garden gate in front of the house clicked, and Ruth started to her feet and saw Kenard's tall, slender figure passing down the garden walk, and the next moment the bell rang.

Then she heard him ask for her, and a minute later he was in the room, and pale and trembling they stood and clasped each other's hands.

CHAPTER XLI.

PARTING WORDS.

"You got my telegram?" were the first faltering words that Kenard Seaforth spoke.

"Yes," half-whispered Ruth.

"I thought it better to send it than to write. I—have much to say, Ruth."

Again a brief monosyllable was Ruth's reply.

"I told you I had exchanged, and I start for India almost immediately. Do you know what determined me to take this step?"

She looked at him for a moment, but did not speak.

"I heard the whole of that shameful story from Murray," went on Seaforth, with increasing agitation; "how that scoundrel struck you—and then I made up my mind."

"I have left him; I shall never see him again."

"But that is not enough, Ruth; the world should know what he is—how disgracefully he has acted."

"Would that do any good, Kenard?" And once more she looked in his face.

"It would entitle you to a divorce from him."

A scarlet flush stole to Ruth's fair skin.

"I wanted to tell you this for one thing—and for another—Ruth, can you understand what I wish to say?"

"Best leave it unsaid, Kenard," answered Ruth, with deep emotion.

"But why?" asked the young man, urgently. "Why should our lives be spoilt by the base conduct of others?"

"We cannot undo what is done," said Ruth in a low tone, casting down her eyes.

"Yes, we can undo it ; if you will trust me and go to India with me, you can get a divorce from Audley, and we can be married, and then it will be all right, you know."

Ruth shook her head.

"No, no ; we must not blind ourselves," she said.

"But what are you afraid of?" urged Seaforth. "You surely can trust me?"

"Yes, indeed I can trust you!"

"Then you are afraid of what people will say? If everything were known, no one could blame us!"

"But everything can never be known, Kenard; never is known. But it is not about what people would say that I am afraid."

"Then what is it, Ruth?"

Ruth turned her face away, and tried to frame her thoughts in words.

"You have got a mother, have you not, Kenard?" she said, in faltering tones. "We lost ours when we were children—perhaps had she lived——"

"Yes, I have a mother," said Kenard, with a certain uneasiness in his voice.

"And she is a good woman," went on Ruth, with a ring of passionate pathos in her accents; "we cannot only think of ourselves—and—and there is something else."

"Tell me what you mean?"

"There are the laws of God, Kenard. We were not brought up to think of these things—Frances always scoffed at them, and you see the end!"

Seaforth was silent for a moment or two. Perhaps his conscience smote him; perhaps he remembered he was in truth urging Ruth to do what in his own heart he knew was wrong.

"As I said before, we are not like other people," he answered presently.

"That is true; it was by no fault of ours we were parted, but still the parting came. I have thought it all over," she went on, her voice trembling and broken by the strong feelings in her heart, "I have thought of my life after you are gone——"

She broke down here, and Seaforth, deeply moved, went up to her and clasped her hand.

"Can you bid me go?" he asked.

Her answer was a sob, and Seaforth led her to an easy

chair by the fire, and knelt down on the rug before her, holding both her hands in his.

"Look here, Ruth," he said, raising his earnest, handsome, young face, and looking straight at her, "I am not going to deny that I know there are scruples, or whatever you call them, to be got over, but don't you think it's too late to talk of these things now? You care for me and I care for you most truly and dearly, and what is the use of struggling against feelings which we know exist? If you had a good husband I am not a man to ask you to leave him, but a brute like Audley——"

"Let us not think of him, but of others—of your mother——"

"In time, perhaps——"

"Ah, Kenard!"

Neither of them spoke for a few minutes after this, but both understood. And presently, with a soft, caressing touch, Ruth put out her hand and pushed back some of Kenard's brown hair, as he was still kneeling at her feet.

"I want you to promise me something," she said, in a low tone.

"What is it, Ruth?"

"Do not speak of this again—I will stay on here with my father—and when you go away——"

Seaforth rose to his feet abruptly, and began walking up and down the little room with hasty and irregular footsteps, his mind violently agitated with the most contending emotions. For five or six minutes he did this, and then he went back to Ruth's side, and laid his hand on the back of the chair where she was sitting.

"I will obey you," he said; "forgive my selfishness, Ruth—I might have known——"

"You will be glad afterwards, Kenard," she answered, gently; "glad you will not have to blush when you hear my name."

"I should never have done that."

"You do not know. Ah! I could not have borne it!" she added, looking round, and taking his hand in hers, "shame is so bitter; Frances has taught me how terribly bitter."

"There is none for you, then," he said; and again he knelt down before her. "Ruth, will you write to me when I am in India, and let me know all about your daily life?"

"Yes, though I shall not have much to tell," and she smiled sadly.

"You don't know; and your letters will be a help to me. I won't forget then that I've a good woman thinking of me sometimes at home."

"Always thinking of you, Kenard."

"Will you, my dear? Ah! Ruth, you don't know how fond I am of you!"

Ruth suppressed the deep sigh which arose unbidden to her lips, and for a few minutes they both were silent. It was a strange scene; the dusky early twilight had stolen around them, and only the firelight lit the pale young faces of the two who were about to part, though this separation was tearing their heartstrings. At last Kenard moved.

"I can bear this no longer, dear," he said; "let me go."

"Yes," and Ruth rose, but Kenard still knelt holding both her hands fast clasped in his.

"Before I leave you," he said, looking up in her face, "will you put your hands on my head, and say, 'God bless you?'"

"Oh! yes, yes—God bless you and keep you, my dear, dear Kenard!"

"And you will not change to me?"

"I shall never change."

"Then I carry your promise away with me;" and he stooped his head, and kissed first one of her hands and then the other. "Good-bye, Ruth—good-bye, my darling."

"Good-bye, Kenard."

He rose to his feet as she spoke, and for a moment or two stood looking in her face with great earnestness.

"I shall often see you when I am far away," he murmured.

Ruth said nothing; the overpowering emotion of her heart was too great for words.

"Will you kiss me?" asked Kenard, almost in a whisper, and she answered by flinging her arms round his neck, and for a moment her head lay on his breast. Then she raised it and kissed him, and after straining her in his arms for an instant longer, with a muttered blessing he turned away.

"God keep you! God help us!" he half-whispered, and the next minute he was gone; and as Ruth heard the house door close behind him, she flung herself down on her knees in a passion of emotion and grief.

"God help us indeed!" she cried. "God help us!"

Kenard Seaforth left Headfort the same night, going direct from there to his father's house. He arrived at Woodside on the following afternoon, and unexpectedly entered the drawing-room, where his mother and Rose Hayward were sitting; and when Mrs. Seaforth saw him, she rose pale and trembling, and almost tottered towards him.

"Kenard!"

"Well, mother, how are you?" he answered with a smile as he took her hand.

But Mrs. Seaforth did not smile in return. She looked in her son's face anxiously, eagerly, and Kenard saw she seemed ill and worn. He then turned to speak to Miss Hayward, who received him with some embarrassment. The truth was that the General, on his return to Woodside, had said enough to fill the fond mother's heart with acute anxiety, and she had allowed a clever girl like Rose Hayward to see that her uneasiness was about her son.

"And are you really going to India?" asked Rose, a moment later, with affected carelessness.

"Yes, really," he answered; "I start in three days. I have come to say good-bye."

"It's rather a jolly place on the whole," said Rose, but as she spoke she suddenly left the room, and Mrs. Seaforth was alone with Kenard.

She looked at him for a moment with intense anxiety depicted on her delicate face, and then went up to him and feverishly grasped his hand.

"Kenard, my dear, my dearest," she said in a trembling and broken voice, "you are not deceiving us—you are going to India alone?"

"Yes, mother," he answered quietly.

"Oh! my dear, thank God! thank God!" cried his mother, throwing herself into his arms, while tears rushed into her eyes and streamed down her faded cheeks. "Your father was uneasy, and I have been so miserable!"

"Let me tell you a short story, dear mother," said Kenard, stooping down and kissing her face; "but you must not be a silly little woman and cry."

He led her to a couch, and sat down beside her, holding one of her trembling hands in his.

"I am going to make a confession," he said, after a moment's hesitation, "so that you may never misjudge—someone any more. You guess who I mean? Ruth Forth."

"Who married Major Audley?" answered Mrs. Seaforth, with a little gasp.

"Yes, who married Major Audley, at the time, or shortly after at least, when I believed she was engaged to me. Mother, I am going to tell you the true history of this marriage now."

"Yes, my dearest."

"I was very fond of Ruth, and she was very fond of me; and I wrote, as you remember, to ask my father's consent and yours to our marriage, which my father declined to give. Well, I was obliged to partly admit this to Ruth, and we agreed that whatever happened we would not part, that we would wait until I got my company, and then go out to India together and live on my pay. But, after this, to my surprise, I got a letter from her, full of grief and pain, to tell me she could not be my wife. The only way I could account for this letter was your opposition to the marriage, and I went to see her, but she would give no further explanation—only said with bitter tears that she could not—that we were to part, and there was no hope for us. Mother, you remember I came here, and was scarcely here when I got a letter from Audley to say he and Ruth were to be married in a fortnight! The news half drove me mad; I telegraphed to Ruth to know if it were true, and she answered it was, and then I went away."

"My dearest, I remember it all too well," said Mrs. Seaforth tremulously, as Kenard paused.

"It seemed to make a changed man of me," continued Kenard, casting down his eyes. "I felt so reckless and miserable—and—and—after a bit I went back to Headfort and saw her again as Audley's wife. No one could look on her face and not see how unhappy she was. She was an altered girl in fact, and met me with unmistakable agitation and emotion. Her sister was married by this time to Colonel Kenyon, and I used to see Ruth at Sudley Park and at Lady Hastings'. At last, one day, I asked her plainly why she had thrown me over—if in fact she had changed to me? She told me she had not changed,

but she would give no reason for her conduct. Then Audley's accident came—when the big gun burst, you know—and everyone thought he was going to die. Unfortunately he did not die, or that would have made it all plain sailing again. The next thing that occurred was Mrs. Kenyon's elopement with Beaton—Sir Arthur Beaton. This cut Ruth to the quick and nearly killed poor Kenyon; and the first time I saw Ruth after this she told me a strange story, told me why she had married Audley, why our two lives had been spoilt."

"Oh, not spoilt, my dearest!" said the fond mother, clasping closer Kenard's hand.

"Something very like it, at least, mother—it is a shameful story, and I can scarcely bring myself to tell it to you quietly."

"Don't excite yourself, dear Kenard."

"Well, I'll try not, but I can't help getting into a rage whenever I think of it. It seems when Ruth was engaged to me, Audley, who had always admired her, had found something disgraceful about Frances Forth, who was then engaged to Colonel Kenyon. And what do you think the cur did? He threatened that unless Ruth married him he would enlighten Kenyon about the past of the woman he was about to marry. Ruth did not tell me quite what it was, but I gathered enough to know that no honorable man would have married Frances had he known the truth. The poor girl—my poor Ruth—went down on her knees and entreated that scoundrel, Audley, not to force her to marry him, but he showed neither mercy nor pity! And Frances entreated Ruth to save her; and, for her sister's sake—to save her from disgrace and shame—Ruth broke her word to me, and married a man whom she absolutely hated."

"But, my dearest, she *did* marry him, and death alone should dissolve this tie."

"Yes, she did marry him," said Kenard, with some bitterness; "she sacrificed herself to screen a shameful woman's shame—for I can use no gentler words; and after all Ruth had done—after she had given what was more to her than life—this Frances ran away from the kindly gentleman that was devoted to her, and all her sister's unselfish love was forgotten and in vain! Then Ruth told me; and you must, I think, understand my feelings."

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"Still——"

"Wait a little, mother, until you hear the end. I was naturally furious with Audley. If he had not been the maimed wretch he is I should have struck him on the face or horsewhipped him, if it cost me my commission; but he has lost a leg, and is greatly shattered—however, I need not talk of this—well, I went up to town after I left here the last time, and I went to see Ruth. There are two drawing-rooms in the house where they were, and Ruth received me in the inner room, and that scoundrel Audley must have been listening to our conversation in the front room. At all events he overheard me abusing him pretty plainly, and would you believe it, after I left he went to the room where Ruth was, and struck her a terrible blow on the face—the brute that he is!"

"It is very bad, certainly, but——"

"Dr. Murray came and told me, and told me also how Ruth had at once left her husband's house, and gone down to Headfort to her father's. And when I heard this, when I knew that for my sake she had lost her home, I made up my mind."

"Oh, Kenard, don't don't tell me that——"

"Have a little patience, mother, and you shall hear it all. I told you that I was going to make a confession, and I will not pretend I didn't do what I did. I went down to Headfort and tried to persuade Ruth to go to India with me, and get a divorce from Audley, to which I know she had the fullest right—but I tried in vain."

"Oh, my son, my son!" cried the poor little timid mother, covering her face with one of her thin hands.

"Ruth would not listen to me, and she bade me think of you, and all the pain this step would have cost you. In fact," and Kenard rose hastily and went to the window to endeavor to conceal his agitation, "we parted—and—and—I think sometimes she will pray for me—and that is all."

"Mrs. Seaforth breathed a long sigh of relief; and yet that her Kenard should have done such a thing as to try to induce a married woman under any circumstances to leave her husband was a great shock to her sensitive mind. She sat there, pale and trembling, for a few moments, and then rose and crossed the room, and put her hand on her son's arm, and looked up with her loving eyes into his face.

"My dearest!" she said tenderly, and he stooped down and kissed her.

"So you see," he continued, with a little break in his voice, which told the depth of his feelings, "when you hear anyone abusing Ruth, you will know it was your son who was the sinner, and—and—not the sweetest, dearest—but I cannot speak of it!" And he quickly turned away his head, for his eyes were dim with tears.

"Well, let us thank God," murmured the mother.

"And—you won't want me to marry Miss Hayward now, mother, will you?" said Kenard, after a few moments' silence.

"No, my darling, you have no heart to give."

CHAPTER XLII.

A DIVORCE.

RUTH led a very quiet life during the six months which followed Kenard Seaforth's departure for India. And in these months a change crept over her heart, for she found by experience that there were sorrows in the world as keen and bitter as her own.

She never saw Audley; his once passionate love for her had indeed turned to hate ever after he knew she had told the story of his disgraceful conduct to Seaforth, and the only communication that had passed between them had been carried on by his lawyer and Colonel Forth.

The lawyer had written on behalf of Major Audley, to offer a sufficient income for his wife to live on, but this, at Ruth's earnest and even tearful entreaty, Colonel Forth declined.

"Don't let us take a penny from him, father," she prayed; "you would not indeed, if you knew all."

Of course, Colonel Forth had his grumble, for it was his nature; but still on the whole the father and daughter got on much better together than before Ruth's marriage. Perhaps Ruth began to realize that in their girlish days neither Frances nor herself had ever tried by kindness to soften the sour man's heart. Her own troubles had made her nature very pitiful, and she began to excuse her father's

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little outbursts of temper, and her "soft answers" often turned away his "wrath."

What annoyed Colonel Forth excessively was that the people in Headfort followed the common rule of being cold to those who need most kindness. The sun of prosperity having ceased to shine on the Forths, their friends passed away with its rays. Of course, they had very good reasons for this change, they told themselves, with some truth. Mrs. Kenyon's disgraceful conduct, and then the scandal of Mrs. Audley leaving her poor, wounded husband, was sufficient to make any respectable person anxious to drop such acquaintances. In vain the kindly young Scotch doctor told them that the person who ought to be ashamed of himself was Major Audley, and not his young wife; that he had absolutely struck her, and so on.

"I've no doubt he had very good reason, if he did," answered the lady to whom Dr. Murray was talking. And Lady Hastings, who of all women ought to have been a little lenient to the failings of her own sex, was very bitter in her remarks both on Frances and Ruth.

"And such a charming man as poor Major Audley is, too!" she said, with a little shrug of her pretty shoulders, to one of her new admirers at the Fort. "I met Mrs. Audley in the street the other day, and I felt so embarrassed, for one does not like to seem unkind, you know, and yet I felt I *ought* not to bow to her; but she had the good taste not to give me the chance, for she never looked up."

Ruth, indeed, gave no one the chance of being cold or ungracious to her, for she never looked in the face of any of her former acquaintances. Even when the Vicar, with good-natured officiousness, called and approached the subject of her separation from Major Audley, saying: "Could nothing be done, my dear young lady, in this sad, sad case? If you think the kind offices of a friend would avail anything towards reconciliation, permit me to be that friend." Ruth answered coldly and repressively—

"I do not wish to be reconciled to Major Audley; willingly I shall never see him again, and I do not care to talk about it."

"Of course," said the Vicar, when afterwards relating this conversation, "I do not wish to be censorious—I trust I never am; but still I hope there may not be something more in this than appears. Major Audley may have had

good cause—for depriving his young wife of the shelter of his roof, and her reticence on the subject to my mind points strongly to guilt. True, it may have been from incompatibility of temper, for the temper of some ladies is no doubt very trying" (the shoe pinched the Vicar himself here), "but then if it were only this, why shrink so from the discussion of the subject? It is truly sorrowful, and I hear Colonel Kenyon's divorce case will soon come on."

Now this fat, comfortable, little man meant no harm by his idle words! It was simply that he loved gossip and liked to have his finger in every pie, that he was ready to shrug and whisper away a woman's good name. Luckily we do not hear all that is said of us, and Ruth, leading her quiet, self-contained life, was beginning to realise some of the immense gravity of our existence.

As she had told Seaforth, from her earliest childhood and all through her young girlhood, she had heard only scoffs and jests at things high or holy. Frances never pretended to have any thought or hopes beyond her own selfish enjoyment, and ever thrust from her mind the idea that a time must come when her beauty would be as nothing, and she would stand face to face with a silent shadow she could not charm away. Colonel Forth's character had not been an elevating model for his children to have constantly before their eyes. He also made no pretence to seem what he was not; but still in Ruth's young heart a germ lay hidden, the bud and blossom of which could but be sweet and pure. Her early love for Frances had blinded her to right and wrong; she would have done anything for the beautiful sister whom she could not blame. But now the scales had fallen from her eyes, and with her clearer sight she began to look around; to see there was something more to live for than each passing day.

A very simple incident first drew her attention to the sorrows and wants of those around her. In one of the small back streets of Headfort, when she was out shopping, she came upon a group of errand boys, who were surrounding a little fellow weeping in their midst. Ruth stopped to inquire what was the matter, and half-a-dozen young voices were eager to tell her. The small boy, who was crying, had been given sixpence by his mother to purchase some tea and bread, and had lost it on the way.

"And mammy has no money," he sobbed out, rubbing his little dirty hands over his red and tear-swollen blue eyes.

"If that is all," said Ruth, kindly, "don't cry any more—like a good boy. I'll give you sixpence."

She drew out her slender purse, but found she had nothing less than half-a-crown. She was not rich enough to give this, so she asked the boy to take her to the shop he was going to buy the tea at, and that she would pay for it. The little fellow brightened up at once at this proposal, and gleefully led Ruth to the small general dealer's shop where he was accustomed to make his purchases.

A respectable woman was standing behind the counter, to whom Ruth related how her tiny companion happened to be in her charge.

"I am sure it's very kind of you, ma'am," said the woman, "for this is little Johnny Robson, and his mother is a poor widow who could ill have spared her drop of tea, for it's about all she gets, poor soul."

Ruth was interested, and inquired further particulars about Johnny's mother; the boy stood with his wide-open blue eyes fixed contemplatively on a string of figs, hanging by the side of the counter, while Ruth and the shopwoman were talking of his parents.

It was one of those common sad tragedies with which the dwellers by the sea are painfully familiar. Johnny's father had been a fisherman, and had been lost in a sudden squall off the dangerous coast. He had left a young widow and a baby boy, and the poor bereaved woman had struggled on alone for the last seven years, and supported herself and Johnny by charring and washing. But lately her health had completely failed her, and she was unable to do anything but sew, and "is often very nigh starving, I believe," said the shopwoman; and Johnny listened with an unmoved countenance to this sad statement, his small mind being fully occupied in coveting the string of figs.

"Oh! poor thing," said Ruth pitifully; and after all she spent her half-crown, buying tea, bread, eggs, and a little bacon for the poor widow, and observing the fixed direction of Johnny's blue eyes, she purchased the string of figs also, and presented them to the delighted urchin.

Together they left the shop, Johnny devouring the figs by the way, and then went to one of the poorest little streets of Headfort.

"Mammy lives there," said Johnny, pointing to a small cottage ; "she's a room there."

"Well, be a good boy, and take her the things you have got, and tell her I'll come and see her to-morrow," said Ruth ; and Master Johnny needed no second bidding. He started off at a run, and then suddenly stopped, and after a moment's hesitation returned to Ruth, who was standing watching him, with a smile.

"Please, Miss," he said, "thank ye," and then again he was off as fast as his feet could carry him, and Ruth walked home pensively, glad to think that she had been able to do a little good.

She kept her promise, and went the next day to see Mrs. Robson. She found a woman bent and bowed by the heavy burdens she had borne so long ; but when Ruth looked into her wasted face she was astonished to find an expression there at once sweet and serene.

"My little lad told me about ye, Miss," she said addressing Ruth ; "may the Lord Himself bless and reward ye for what ye have done."

"Oh ! it was nothing," blushed Ruth.

"It was *everything* to me, Miss ; there was neither bite nor sup in the house, and now it is full," answered the poor woman with deep gratitude in her voice and manner, and Ruth felt not a little affected.

She sat down and looked around this poverty-stricken abode. It was clean, but from the patched and tattered coverlet on the meagre bed to the bare floor and cold hearth, everything told one sad tale of bitter privation. The poor woman's own dress also was thin and worn, and her features pinched and pale. But she made no complaint, and the deeply devotional tone of her conversation told of one whose hopes were fixed beyond the grave.

Ruth left her deeply impressed. Here was a woman, ill, miserably poor, and yet thankful for her daily bread ; who found comfort and help in the worn Book which lay on the little table near her, and consolation in the gracious promise it contained that for her would come a day when all her tears would be wiped away.

"There must be something in it," thought Ruth as she returned home ; returned to find her father grumbling about small things—fretting and fuming over his comfortable dinner, using bad language if this or that was not

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cooked to a turn ! The Colonel chanced to be in a particularly bad temper that day, and to his young daughter the contrast between the one who had so much and the one who had so little was very great.

Ruth went often after this to see the poor widow, carrying with her each time some little comfort and help. And, gradually, she heard of others in great need and trouble, and to her sorrow and regret found more who wanted than she had money to give to. When she and Frances were girls, Colonel Forth had allowed them each twenty-five pounds a year for their dress. And when Ruth had returned to him, and after it was settled that she would receive nothing from Major Audley, the Colonel half grudgingly had offered her fifty pounds a year for her personal expenses. But Ruth had declined to receive more than the half of this sum ; therefore she had very little money to give away. But one day she saw advertised in a newspaper that in a large town, at no great distance from Headfort, the proprietor of a certain journal was offering prizes for short stories ; these stories to be sent in by a certain date. The first prize was five pounds, the second three, and so on ; and Ruth determined to enter this competition, so that she might try to earn a little extra money to give to her poor friends.

She had tried to write before—crude, sweet lines—immature as the mind that created them. There was a song of unending love and happiness, penned in the bright days when she first knew Kenard Seaforth, and written before the dark shadow of sorrow had fallen on her heart, over which she now shed some bitter tears as she turned over these girlish productions. Then she began her tale, and contrived to turn the “old, old story” so prettily that she actually won the second prize, and was the richer by three pounds in consequence ; one of which she carried with no small pride to poor Mrs. Robson, who received it as a boon from God. And Ruth was quite happy in her success, and sent a copy of her story out to a friend in India, to whom she often wrote. It made a new interest in her life in fact, and the editor of the paper was so pleased with it, he asked her to write another for him, for which she was to receive five pounds, and Ruth felt she was on the road to fortune !

Thus, between her work and her kindness to her poor

neighbors, she had not much time to notice nor to heed that her richer neighbors ignored her existence. And so the days passed quietly on, until one morning her father, who was reading his newspaper at breakfast, gave a sudden exclamation, and brought his hand heavily down on the table with a very strong expression of wrath.

"What is the matter, father?" asked Ruth, looking up.

"I just guessed it," said the Colonel passionately, "when Kenyon went up to town last week, that this confounded affair was coming off. He's got his divorce; there was no defence of course," and he flung the newspaper across the table to Ruth, who lifted it with a trembling hand, and read there, "the petition of Colonel Hugh Kenyon for a divorce, by reason of the misconduct of his wife, Mrs. Frances Kenyon, with the co-respondent, Sir Arthur Beaton, Bart. There was no defence."

Colonel Kenyon's deposition followed; the date of his marriage, his perfect faith and trust in his wife's affection, and the entire happiness of their brief married life, until the day that she left him with Sir Arthur Beaton. He further deposed that until she had written to her sister to tell her she was with Sir Arthur Beaton, he had been totally unable to believe it.

Further evidence was then given—the painful and degrading evidence, with which we are too familiar—and it was further stated that a citation and petition had been served on Sir Arthur Beaton and Mrs. Kenyon, at their hotel at Monte Carlo, and that Sir Arthur Beaton wrote acknowledging service on the back of the citation.

The Judge of the Court then pronounced a decree *nisi* with costs; and Colonel Kenyon and Frances Kenyon were free.

Ruth, who had grown very pale as she read these details, laid the paper down without a word.

"I suppose he'll marry her," said Colonel Forth savagely; "but by Jove if he doesn't I'll shoot him dead!"

CHAPTER XLIII.

A BITTER ENEMY.

A COPY of the same paper, telling the same painful story of the divorce of Colonel Kenyon and his wife Frances, some days after was also lying on the breakfast-table of the young couple who had caused all this sorrow and shame.

The news had been telegraphed to them, therefore it was not new ; and yet there was a painful expression on Sir Arthur Beaton's handsome features as he read Colonel Kenyon's evidence of his perfect trust in his wife's affection, and knew how that trust had been betrayed. Frances was sitting opposite to him, beautiful, smiling, and all his surroundings were fair and pleasant ; yet a sharp pang darted into the young man's heart when he remembered the genial host of Sudley, the kindly gentleman to whose true hand-clasp he had been false.

"What are you reading that makes you look so cross?" asked Frances, in her usual half-jesting, half-careless way.

Sir Arthur did not speak for a moment ; he rose hastily, and went to one of the open windows of the room, and stood looking vaguely out at the blue sea beyond. He had taken for a season this white, sunlit villa—a lovely spot, with the waters of the Mediterranean lapping the cliffs below, and the gardens around it rich with flowers and golden orange fruit. Monte Carlo delighted Frances, with its beauties, its excitements, and easy moralities. She liked risking her money at the gambling tables, and was enchanted when she won and took her losses very calmly, seeing they were always repaid by the lavish hand which had surrounded her with luxury and wealth.

"What is the matter, Arthur?" she asked again, as he stood still by the window, pushing back the green sun-blinds, so that the bright beams fell on his uncovered hair.

"Nothing," he answered, without turning round.

"I am certain that you have been reading something in

that paper which has annoyed you," continued Frances, and she rose and went to his side. "Let me see—what is it?" and she would have taken the newspaper from his hand, but he held it fast.

"Don't read it, Frances," he said; "it is the report of the divorce case."

"Is that all?" she answered calmly. "Let me read it, Arthur."

Then he gave it to her, and stood watching her beautiful face as she read the pitiable words that Colonel Kenyon had spoken in the court, and something in her expression as she did so—a hardness, an indifference—vaguely shocked and distressed him.

"Well, I'm very glad it's over," she said, after she had finished reading it, laying the paper down on a chair which was near. "How soon can we be married now, Arthur?"

"I'll write to the lawyer fellows to inquire to-day," he answered. "You have to wait a little time, I know, or there's something about the Queen's Proctor intervening; however, I shall soon hear."

"Won't you be glad?" And she laid her hand upon his arm, and looked into his face with her shining hazel eyes.

"Of course," he answered, but that was all; and presently he strolled out to smoke a cigarette on the terrace, and Frances lay down on a couch and began fanning herself with a large blue feather fan, the exact tint of her tea-gown, and thinking as she did so that the worry of this business would soon be all over now.

"They won't give the cold shoulder to Lady Beaton," she thought, with a contemptuous smile. "Ruth, at least, need not have acted as she has done; but I'll soon be white-washed."

And of what was the young man thinking who was pacing on the terrace below, from whose heart during the last six months gradually the glamor of his first deep passion and love had been fading away? Sir Arthur Beaton, impetuous, erring though he might be, had yet high and noble instincts, and these, after he knew her well, had chafed against certain characteristics of Frances, though with the generosity of his nature he had always tried to hide this from her knowledge. There was nothing that she had wished for that he had not granted, and no

attention nor devotion that he had not given her ; but still he knew his love was not as it had been, and that the woman for whom he had sacrificed his honor was not worthy of the price.

But he had never for a moment faltered in his intention to marry her as soon as the law would permit. In vain his mother had written to him again and again, entreating him not to make so great a sacrifice.

"If my heart did not bid me do so, my honor would," he had answered, and nothing served to alter his determination. "I am doubly bound to her," he told himself, as he walked up and down on the terrace, smoking endless cigarettes, and plucking occasionally one of the brilliant blossoms around him, or gazing vaguely at the deep blue sky melting in the distance in the deep blue sea. He felt restless and somewhat uneasy, stifling back certain feelings which would rise within him—feelings of doubt and dissatisfaction, for he would rather have seen Frances' beautiful face pale and stained with tears when she had read the report of Colonel Kenyon's touching words, than the look of smiling, indifferent contentment which had crept over it, when she actually realised she was free.

Presently a step sounded on the terrace behind him, and turning quickly round to his great surprise he recognized Major Audley approaching him.

"You here, Audley!" he said, advancing to meet him with out-stretched hand. "When did you arrive?"

"Only last night; I came on purpose to see you, Beaton," answered Audley, gravely.

"And," asked Sir Arthur, with a sudden blush, "is—your wife with you?"

"No, my wife has left me," replied Audley, darkly.

"Left you?"

"Yes, I'll tell you afterwards—I have something to say to you first."

"And what have you to say?"

"I left England the moment I heard that Colonel Kenyon had obtained his divorce; I came to try to save you, Beaton, from great dishonor."

Sir Arthur drew his tall, slender form up to its fullest height, and a haughty expression passed over his fine features.

"Major Audley, permit me to tell you," he said, "there

are some subjects on which no man has a right to speak to another."

"As a rule I grant you, but not on this."

"You will forgive me if I repeat that I have no wish to discuss the subject."

"You mean to marry Mrs. Kenyon, then?"

"Certainly I mean to marry her; could you for a moment doubt it?"

"I guessed as much, and so made a journey to save you. Nay, Beaton, listen to me for a minute; you shall not at least run blind-fold into disgrace and shame."

"I fail to follow your meaning, Major Audley," said Sir Arthur very haughtily.

"I have some claim upon your patience at least; but for me you would have shot yourself for the sake of a worthless woman."

"I will not hear her abused! I quite admit your kindness to me long ago when I was so foolish, and anything personal that you have to say to me I shall listen to, but Mrs. Kenyon's name must be respected."

Audley gave a harsh and bitter laugh.

"I will tell you a story then?" he said, "and leave Mrs. Kenyon's name alone for the present. I shall go back to before my marriage, when we were at that miserable hole Headfort, where I was fool enough to fall in love with a pretty face!"

"Your wife?"

"Yes, my wife," answered Audley; "one of the two fair sisters I had the misfortune to become connected with. But by your leave I'll sit down here, for this cursed leg of mine constantly pains me."

They sat down on one of the seats on the terrace facing the sea. The view from this spot was beautiful, and nature's lavish hand had flung around her choicest gifts. There was no sound but the faint lap of the blue water below; nothing to mar the lovely scene; yet here Arthur Beaton was fated to hear words which, as they fell upon his shocked ears, cut into his heart like a sharp and cruel sword.

"I had the misfortune," began Audley's scoffing voice, "as I told you before, to fall in love with a pretty face. Miss Ruth Forth, somehow, happened to win my fancy; and we can never account for these things. However,

there it was ; I liked the girl, and I believed her to be young, innocent, and good. She never took to me apparently, and this, I suppose, piqued my vanity, or stimulated my love. At all events I genuinely cared for her as I had cared for no other woman, and I liked her well enough to wish to make her my wife."

"But why tell me all this?"

"Have a little patience, my dear fellow. I assure you I am not telling it to you from any sentimental pleasure in relating my own folly. Well, I was in love then; and one night I had been out dining in the neighborhood—at the Fords', at Whitham—and I was walking back to the Fort, by the cliff walk, in one of the most tremendous thunderstorms I ever saw in England."

"I remember the storm," interrupted Sir Arthur.

"I daresay. The lightning was so vivid that it lit up the whole scene like daylight; and, just as I reached the steep path cut through the cliffs to the sands, which I daresay you also remember?"

Beaton nodded.

"Well, just as I reached this spot, there came a flash that showed me very plainly everything before and around me. And what do you think it also showed me? The face of Ruth Forth, who was hurrying up the cliff walk, in a torrent of rain, close on midnight! I distinctly saw her face, and I followed her home. She went into Colonel Forth's house, and I, being in love, was very curious to know what had taken her out in the storm; in fact, I was jealous. I thought that she had gone down to the bay to meet some other man, and I determined to find out if this were true.

"Beaton," continued Audley, his voice growing passionate and impressive, "I did love that girl as much as I hate her now! I went down the steep and slippery path cut in the rocks with the storm at its height, and when I reached the sands I walked round the bay, and as I did this I stumbled over something lying in my way, and I stooped down and picked it up, and found it to be a small spade—a small spade I had seen before—belonging to Ruth Forth. Seaforth had cut her name on it one Sunday afternoon, and I knew there was no mistake; and I knew also that Ruth must have taken it there for some purpose, and I determined to find out what that purpose was."

"But what have I to do with this?" asked Beaton, with some impatience.

"Wait a minute and you shall see. I marked the spot with a stick where I found the spade, and carried the spade away with me to the Fort, and there I got a lantern, and carried it and the spade back to the shore. I put the lantern down, and plainly saw that the sand where I had found the spade had recently been disturbed; and then I began to dig, and I dug up what Miss Ruth Forth had buried there!"

"Well, what was it?"

"You may well ask. A new-born babe—a small atom of humanity—lay there in its grave by the sea! It was placed in a box, and rolled and swathed, I suppose for the purpose of concealment, in a woman's black gown. Beaton, in a moment I understood it all. This child was the child of Frances Forth, born in secret, and in sin; and Ruth was the puppet in her sister's hands, whom she had employed to conceal her shame."

Sir Arthur Beaton sprang to his feet with a vehement exclamation of anger and disbelief.

"I do not believe it!" he cried. "What proofs have you of such a hideous story?"

"Damning proofs, my dear fellow," answered Audley, with bitter emphasis. "You would think, would you not, that such a sight as that would have cured a man's love for a fair face, but it did not cure mine. I asked Ruth to meet me after that day at Sudley, when poor Kenyon gave his garden party, and you, if you remember, lay at your charmer's feet."

Beaton turned his head away with a passionate gesture.

"Well, I met Ruth, and told her what I had seen, and she admitted the truth; and my price for keeping the secret—for allowing Kenyon to marry this woman, was that Ruth should marry me."

"You did this!" said Beaton, with strong indignation.

"I am not going to deny it; all is fair in love and war, you know, and I was in love with Ruth, more fool I! But, though I let Kenyon marry Madam Jezebel, as I always call her, and come to grief for his folly, I am not going to let you do so—at least unwarned."

Beaton began to pace backwards and forwards on the terrace in violent agitation.

"If I could believe this," he said, stopping suddenly before Audley, who was watching him with his cold and cynical gaze.

"I will swear to the truth of it ; every word of it is true ; Mrs. Kenyon dare not deny it ; Ruth dare not deny it, for if they do a darker charge even than shame may be brought home to them, and *murder* is an ugly word."

"Murder !" repeated Beaton, in horror.

"Yes. How do we know that this frail breath was not stopped before it had time to make any noise in the world ? These sisters were alone in that little house when the child was born, except one maid in the kitchen, whom they could easily send out. And, at all events, concealment of birth and secret burial bring them within the clutches of the law."

"But did your wife—did Mrs. Audley, confess all this ?" asked Beaton in a hoarse and broken voice. "Audley, are you sure you are not deceiving me ? Remember this is life or death to me—honor, or gross dishonor."

"It is true."

"But why have you broken your promise ? Ruth Forth married you—you say for her sister's sake. Why have you not kept your word to her ?"

"*Why !* Shall I tell you ?" answered Audley with a vindictive gleam in his light prominent eyes. "After Frances fled with you, Ruth, whom it seems was once engaged to Seaforth, before she married me, sent for her old lover, and confided in his ears why she did not keep her promise to him. Don't doubt me," he added, darkly and passionately. "I heard her tell him the shameful tale in my own house ; and then I turned her out of it, and it is six months since I have seen or heard of her."

"It seems impossible—utterly impossible !" exclaimed Beaton, who was agitated beyond control.

He was pale, and his face seemed to have grown haggard and worn in the brief moments in which he had listened to words which upset the whole plans of his life. Again he began pacing backwards and forwards, recalling little things to his mind which confirmed Audley's story. He remembered how Ruth Forth and Seaforth were supposed to be lovers, and with what surprise he had heard of her marriage to Audley, and how Seaforth had always warned him against Frances. Then he remembered his passionate

love for the beautiful woman who had rejected him as a poor man, and fled with him when he came into wealth and honors; and he thought too of the struggles in his own conscience, when the gray-haired master of Sudley had treated him as an honored guest.

"Is Mrs. Kenyon in the house?" presently asked Audley.

"Yes," answered Sir Arthur, abruptly.

"Because if you choose—if you have still any doubts that I have been speaking the truth, and nothing but the truth, I will go in and face her, and force her to admit the facts."

Sir Arthur did not speak for a moment after he had listened to this proposal. Then he looked Audley full in the face.

"No," he said. "I believe your word, and I will not insult her."

"But you will not marry her?"

"I cannot," said Beaton, sternly; "my people have some claim on me. I cannot drag my name so low as that."

"Then my errand is done," said Audley, rising. "I am sorry my visit has been such a painful one to you, but I have only done my duty."

But Sir Arthur gave him no thanks. Pale and grave he went with him to the gates of the villa, where Audley's carriage was still standing, and then after he had watched him drive away, returned back through the roses and geraniums, along the white sunlit terrace, with a heart rent and torn, and full of bitterness, remorse and shame.

CHAPTER XLIV.

A STRANGE RETURN.

HE entered the house and went straight to the shaded room, where Frances still lay on her couch, and still held in her white hand the blue feather fan—the hand and fan drooping down languidly by her side; but now she was reading a paper-bound novel, which she flung on the floor as Sir Arthur went in.

"There is not much in that, at any rate," she said, care-

lessly, looking up at him. "What a time you have been out, Arthur! You look quite pale; you have been too long in the sun."

"I have had a visitor," he said, in a hoarse, agitated voice.

"A visitor? Who was it? Why did you not bring him in?"

Sir Arthur did not speak for a moment; he shrank from stabbing this pleasure-loving, beautiful creature lying before him; and again Frances lifted her bright hazel eyes to his face.

"What is the matter?" she asked. "You have not heard any bad news, Arthur?"

"I have heard such news," he answered, with a passionate break in his voice, "that I would rather the man had struck me dead than compelled me to listen to such shameful words."

"What do you mean?" and Frances raised herself up on the couch.

"Frances," went on Sir Arthur, with deep emotion, "Major Audley has been here, and has told me why your sister married him; the bitter cause that had placed her in his power."

Frances gave a cry, sprang to her feet and grew deadly pale.

"*Audley!*" she repeated in a low, guilty, terrified tone.

"Yes, Audley—the man who knew your secret, and traded on it to win your sister, has now come with his hateful words to me."

"The cur! The coward!" came hissing from Frances' pale lips.

Sir Arthur did not speak. Again, as he had done on the terrace, he began pacing to and fro with restless footsteps, and Frances' eyes followed him with a fugitive and frightened gaze. Then she seemed to gain courage; she drew her lips tightly together, she made a step forward, and a moment later followed him, and slid her hand through his arm.

"What did he say?" she said. "What lies did he invent? What secret do you mean?"

Sir Arthur turned round and looked at her, and gently, but firmly, put her hand away.

"Why did you deceive me?" he asked. "Why did you

teach me to love you when you could have had no love to give?"

"How do you mean? I did love you, Arthur; I do love you."

"It must have been very little," he answered bitterly.

"I cannot understand you; you have allowed Audley to poison your mind against me, and it is not generous."

"Generous!" he repeated. "That is scarcely a word between you and me. I swear to you," he went on passionately, "that I would rather have not known this story—gone to my grave thinking there was no shadow of shame on your name but what I myself had brought. But now this cannot be—your sister has told Seaforth—she has left Audley—your secret is known."

Frances gave absolutely a despairing cry.

"*Ruth!*" she cried; "surely not *Ruth!*"

"Yes, Ruth," said Beaton, with a sort of pity creeping into his voice; "she confessed it all to Seaforth, to account to him why she broke off her engagement with him, and Audley overheard her, and then they separated."

"The fool! the fool!" cried Frances, passionately and despairingly; "how could she be so mad?"

"It is done, and cannot be undone," said Sir Arthur, slowly; and then he added, firmly, "and Frances, this must end all question of marriage between us."

"*What!*"

"I cannot marry you under such circumstances."

"You cannot marry me? You who took me from my home—my husband?"

"I did, and God forgive me; but I did not know this—this changes it all; I cannot marry a woman with such a past."

"Oh! don't say that," cried Frances, flinging herself on her knees before him, and seizing fast hold of his reluctant hand. "Arthur, you who loved me so that you were ready to take away your life for my sake! Is it all gone? Have you no pity?—no pity for the fault of a young girl?"

Sir Arthur turned away his head, unable to endure the sight of that beautiful pleading face.

"Think what you have cost me," went on Frances, passionately; "think of the home I left for you—of Colonel Kenyon who loved me so well."

"God knows how often I have thought of him," answered Sir Arthur remorsefully.

"Then don't add to the wrong you did," pleaded Frances; "I know I was as much to blame as you, but I loved you so deeply, Arthur."

"And yet you married Kenyon?"

"What could I do? We had no money to live on at home, and you had no money. Oh! look at me, Arthur; say that you will forget this miserable story, and that you will marry me, as you have promised a thousand times?"

Then Sir Arthur did look at her, and as he did so he raised her to her feet.

"Don't kneel there, Frances. I will see what can be done. I will decide in a few days."

"Say you forgive me!" And she flung her arms round his neck and kissed him.

He kissed her cheek in return.

"May God forgive us both," he murmured, hoarsely; "and now let me go, I cannot bear any more."

He left the room a moment later, and Frances was alone. It was a terrible moment to this vain, proud woman, and her bitter indignation against Audley was scarcely more bitter than the anger and hidden contempt she felt for the man who had just left her, for having hesitated a moment to keep his word, when for his sake she had sacrificed so much.

"But he will," she decided; "he has not strength of mind to break loose from me; but I shall never feel the same to him again—never again."

Yet she grew uneasy when all the afternoon passed and she heard or saw nothing more of Sir Arthur. He had left the villa, the servants told her when she inquired about him, shortly after he had quitted the room where their stormy interview had taken place; and as the hours wore on she sent out two of the men-servants to seek him, with orders to tell him that she wished to see him.

But before either of these men returned an especial messenger brought her a letter from Sir Arthur, which, after she had read it, she flung on the floor with a scream of rage.

And truly those hastily penned words were as daggers thrust into her breast—daggers poisoned by the sense of her own wrong-doing!

"DEAR FRANCES," she read with starting eyes and panting breath, "when you receive this, I shall have started for

England, for I could bear no more such interviews as I have gone through to-day. Do not let us reproach each other, for it is useless, and there is nothing that I can do for you in the way of money and settlements that I shall not most gladly do. I have left two thousand pounds for present expenses to your credit at the Bank, and when I get to town my lawyer will correspond with you about the future. But I have made up my mind, and I *cannot* marry you. Such a marriage could bring only certain misery to us both. Would to God I could undo the evil I have done, but this cannot be, and I owe a duty to my name and honor that I will not ignore. In bitter pain and sorrow,

“ARTHUR BEATON.”

No words can describe the rage, the passionate madness almost, with which Frances read this letter. She dashed it on the floor, she flung the books, the chairs, whatever was near her, in a very paroxysm of fury, in every direction. Then as the first tempest died away, she picked up the letter, and a settled purpose stole into her heart, and made her face hard and bitter, killing for the time the very beauty which had been her ruin.

“He shall not escape me,” she had determined, and ringing the bell violently she summoned her maid, and bade her desire the servants to pack, as she intended to return to England to-morrow.

“Sir Arthur has been summoned there, and I have to follow him,” she told the frightened woman, who knew very well as she looked at the pale, distorted face before her, that something terrible had taken place. Then she drew money out of the bank, sent for the bills, and before the morning was prepared to start in pursuit of the lover who had abandoned her.

She did this with a heart full of such burning and intense indignation against Sir Arthur Beaton that already she was tasting some of the bitter fruit of her own folly. She remembered the young, passionate, ardent man, who had worshipped her very shadow, and who had been ready, as she had told him, to take his own life for her sake. And now! and now! Frances bit her pale lips until the blood came as she journeyed on, and cursed her own madness in leaving her happy home as she had done. But in spite of Sir Arthur's letter, in spite of the rage and bitter-

ness in her own heart, she still clung to the belief that she would force Sir Arthur to make her his wife.

When she reached town she drove at once to the Grosvenor Hotel, where she and Sir Arthur had stayed before, and, in answer to her inquiries, found that he was now there, and that he was in the house.

She desired to be shown to his rooms, and her orders were obeyed.

"What name shall I announce?" inquired the waiter, as he paused before the door of Sir Arthur's private sitting-room.

"I am Lady Beaton," she answered steadily, and the man rapped at the door, and having been told to enter, did announce "Lady Beaton," and Frances found herself once more in the presence of Sir Arthur.

He was sitting at a table writing, looking worn and haggard, when she went in, and as he rose a look of intense pain and annoyance crossed his handsome features.

"Well, are you surprised to see me?" she said half-defyingly.

"Why have you done this?" he answered gravely. "You know it can do no good."

"And did you suppose," said Frances, her face flushing with quick anger, "that I was going to sit down quietly under such an insult as you have offered me? Even if you hate me, Arthur, you must marry me now; you can do nothing less in honor."

"My honor forbids me to do so."

"This is a paltry excuse, and I shall not accept it."

Sir Arthur was silent.

"If you marry me we can live apart," went on Frances, "if all your protestations and vows are grown so cold; but we *must* be married; remember, I have a father to whom I can appeal to protect me."

"I would rather discuss the subject with Colonel Forth than with you."

"But you do not mean to say, you cannot mean to say, that you absolutely refuse to keep your word?" asked Frances loudly and passionately.

"I refuse to marry you; under the circumstances I will not," answered Sir Arthur with great firmness.

Then Frances turned upon him in furious and vehement indignation, cursing the hour she had ever seen his face,



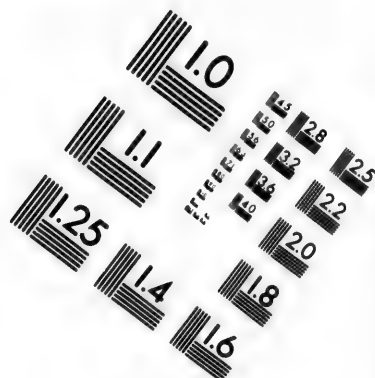
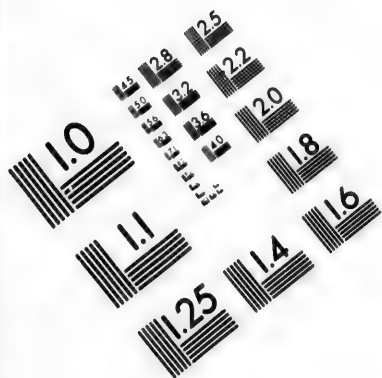
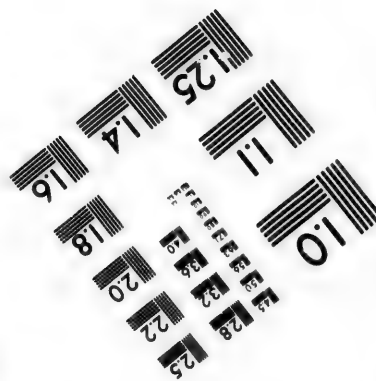
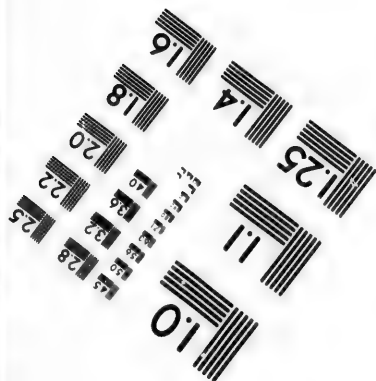
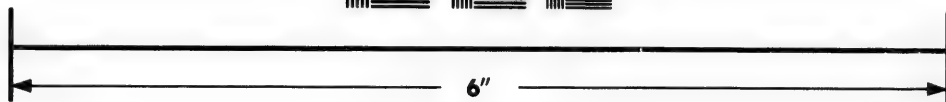
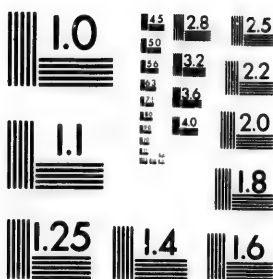
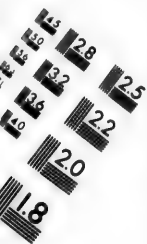


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pouring out such words of hatred, contempt, and scorn, that she stung to the quick the proud and sensitive heart she meant to wound.

But he made no reply. He drew himself up, and stood there facing her—pale, silent, and still.

"But you shall be punished!" she cried, lifting her hand and arm as if in warning. "You may think you can fling me aside when you are tired of me, but we shall see! Yes, we shall see!" And, with these words, she turned and left the room, and Sir Arthur sank down on a seat after she was gone and covered his face with his hand.

It was the summer time at Sudley, and the setting sun, glinting through the trees, was falling with golden shadows on the sward of the smooth green lawn. The day had been a cloudless one, and the air was sweet with the scent of new-mown hay, and with the breath of flowers, which grew in bright profusion around the stately old house. And a great stillness and quietude was over the place, for the evening breeze scarcely rustled the full-leaved oaks, standing in their pride and prime, colored here and there by the western rays pouring through them in floods of light and glory. A peaceful scene; a fair country home which looked a fitting dwelling-place for happy hearts and restful lives; and so thought a woman, with a frown upon her handsome brow, as she entered the grounds of Sudley, and walked slowly along the familiar pathways.

This was Frances Forth, the day after her passionate and decisive interview with Sir Arthur Beaton at the Grosvenor Hotel. To her wayward and indignant heart had come the sudden determination to endeavor to win back Colonel Kenyon's love, or at least to induce him to avenge her wrongs. She had asked no counsel, and had travelled alone down to Headfort, and, thickly veiled, had driven from thence to Sudley, with the most bitter regret stirring in her bosom as she neared her former home, knowing well she was drinking now of the cup she had brewed for others.

She walked on, keeping as much as possible under the shadow of the trees until she reached the house, which she entered by the conservatory door, which was unlocked. She passed through the perfumed air into the hall, crossed it, and then, without rapping, opened the library door, and

as she did so Colonel Kenyon, who was standing at one of the open windows, gazing vaguely out, turned round and saw before him the wife who had forsaken him.

No word came from his pallid lips ; he staggered back a little ; he stared at her as if he were turned to stone.

"Hugh," said Frances, in a faltering tone.

Her voice broke the spell. Grasping the back of a chair, as if to support himself, Colonel Kenyon said, with a great effort—

"I presume I speak to Lady Beaton?"

"No! no!" cried Frances. "Hugh," and she flung herself down on her knees before him, as she had done a few days ago to Sir Arthur Beaton, "I have left him—I shall never return to him—can you, will you, forgive me?" And she tried to grasp his hand, and looked up into his noble, sorrowful face with her imploring eyes.

"I do not understand your meaning," answered Colonel Kenyon, slowly ; "do not kneel there, Frances—it pains me to see you."

He tried to raise her up, but Frances clung to his knees.

"No, let me stay here," she said, tears rushing into her eyes, and streaming down her cheeks ; "it's the fittest place for me—to kneel to you!"

"It can do no good now," he answered gently and sadly.

"If you regret the pain you have given me, it is too late."

"Oh! don't say that," she cried in real and passionate emotion. "I was mad to leave you, Hugh ; I have bitterly regretted it, and—and if you will forgive me—if you will forget the past——"

"You know it is impossible."

"If you will forgive it, then," pleaded Frances, and again she looked up with her beautiful, tearful eyes into the face of the man whose heart she had broken. "If you could learn to love me a little again ; if you——"

"Hush!" interrupted Colonel Kenyon, sternly ; "these are not words to pass between you and me."

Frances winced at the just rebuke, and for a moment or two was silent.

"Why are you here?" presently asked Colonel Kenyon, still sternly.

"I came to ask your pardon," answered Frances, in a voice broken with sobs.

"And where is the man for whom you forsook me?"

"You may well ask," said Frances, indignantly raising her head; "the man who induced me to leave you, to leave my happy home—for I was happy with you, Hugh—now refuses to fulfil his solemn promise to marry me the moment I was free."

"Is this true?" said Colonel Kenyon, and a sudden flush came over his pale face.

"It is quite true; the very day the news of the divorce came to Monte Carlo, where we were, he left for England, and I followed him. It was for no love of him I wished to marry him," she continued, "but because it was but right after I had made such a sacrifice for him in my folly and madness—for I must have been mad to listen to his false words. And so I have come to you—you loved me once, Hugh—for the sake of that love will you revenge my wrongs?"

He looked at her; all the past swept over his heart—the happy life which Arthur Beaton had spoilt, and a dark and angry light kindled in his eyes.

"Where is he?" he asked hoarsely.

"In town, at the Grosvenor Hotel."

"He shall answer to me for what he has done, then," he said sternly, and then he bade her rise.

"Go now," he added; "do not fear, your betrayer shall learn what you once were—to me."

"Oh! forgive me!"

"I cannot!" he said in a broken and passionate voice. "Go as you came;" and Frances rose from her knees, humiliated, abashed—and crept away from the house she had forsaken, as the soft twilight began to fall over the lovely scene.

CHAPTER XLV.

THE BITTER END.

WHILE one sister was thus reaping as she had sown, the other was spending her quiet days trying to do some little good; to wipe away some tears, to lighten some burdens amongst those around her.

Colonel Forth, in his fault-finding way, had grumbled to

his old friend Kenyon that "Ruth was always going bothering about among the poor people now;" and Colonel Kenyon one day had slipped twenty pounds into her hand with his sad smile.

"My dear, this is for your poor pensioners," he said; and Ruth thanked him warmly, and began to tell him some of the little tales of pain and poverty, with which she was now familiar. He listened, sighed, and turned away.

"Come to me whenever you want money," he said; and Ruth had thus been able really to do a great deal of good during the last six months, and there were many who blessed her when her footsteps crossed their thresholds. She used to write and tell Kenard Seaforth out in India all her simple news, and he regularly answered her letters; but no word of love was exchanged between these two, though to hear from Kenard was the one pleasure of Ruth's life.

Yet she was not unhappy. She was fully occupied, for one thing, and her dreamy nature found solace in a hundred things which Frances would never have looked at. She loved to watch the long rolling green waves, and to listen to their weird sad music as they broke upon the shore, speaking to her soul in mystic tongues of strange legends and strange lands. Her stories came more easily to her brain within the sound of the sea, and many a day, too, in the summer time she spent hours among the fields where she had plucked the wild flowers with Kenard a year ago, and would shudder as she passed the gateway where Audley had told her first of his hated love, and of the unhappy secret which placed her in his power.

Since the morning when she had read Colonel Kenyon's divorce case in the newspapers, she had naturally thought much of Frances, but Frances had, as we know, made no sign.

"When I am Lady Beaton it will be time enough," she had told herself in her old scornful way; but once or twice since the divorce Colonel Forth had mentioned her name to Ruth, though it was only to abuse her when he did so. Colonel Kenyon, however, had never mentioned it. He returned from town, but he made no allusion to his reason for going there, and he had never called at Colonel Forth's house since Frances had left him, though Colonel Forth went constantly to Sudley.

Imagine Ruth's surprise then, when on the morning after Frances' miserable visit to Sudley, as Ruth was sitting writing in the little drawing-room by the window, she saw Colonel Kenyon open the garden gate, and a moment or two later he rang the door-bell.

Ruth rose to receive him, and met him in the hall, and it struck her he was looking greyer, and that his face was more lined and haggard even than usual.

"Is your father in?" he asked; and as he spoke Colonel Forth, who had also seen him arrive, came out of the dining-room and shook him warmly by the hand.

"Glad to see you; come in," said Colonel Forth; Kenyon gave no answering word, but silently followed Forth into the dining-room, Ruth also accompanying them.

"My dear, I want a few words alone with your father," he said; and Ruth immediately went out, an uneasy feeling darting through her heart as she did so.

And scarcely had the door closed behind her when Colonel Kenyon broke the long silence he had preserved regarding Frances' name.

"Forth," he said, in a broken and agitated voice, "you will scarcely believe me when I tell you that last night Frances was at Sudley."

"*Frances!*" echoed Forth, his red face growing positively pale with excitement; "impossible!"

"It is true," went on Colonel Kenyon, with deep emotion; "she came back to the home she had forsaken to tell me that the man with whom she had fled now refuses to marry her when he has the power."

"Then I'll shoot him!" cried Colonel Forth, with an oath, striking his hand violently down on the table near.

"That is my right," answered Kenyon; "I have come to you this morning to tell you so; I promised this—unhappy woman that Sir Arthur Beaton shall find that—she was once at least very dear to us."

His voice trembled and broke as he uttered the last words, and he turned away his head, unwilling even that his old friend should see how deeply he was moved.

"The scoundrel! the sneak!" cried Forth, in extreme indignation. "When he induced that mad girl to leave such a home as yours, not to have the honor, the decency, even to marry her! I never heard of such a thing—but are you sure?"

"She was in bitter distress, and she told me the moment the news of the divorce reached Monte Carlo, that he started for England that very day ; and Frances followed him, but he declined to do the one thing left him as a gentleman."

"And you mean to call him out?"

"I mean to call him out ; we can cross over to Calais," answered Colonel Kenyon, sternly.

"And if you don't shoot him I will," said Forth, fiercely ; "disgraced as she is, he shall find that the wife and daughter of two gentlemen is not to be treated as a wanton."

"If I fall, then, you will take my place," replied Kenyon, with stern determination. "He is in town, at the Grosvenor ; let us go up to-day, and unless he is a coward we shall force him to fight. and if he refuses I shall horse-whip him."

They soon settled it after this. Colonel Kenyon was calm, pale, and quiet, but Forth was furious with indignation. He raved against Beaton at one moment, and Frances at another.

"Spare her," said Kenyon ; "her punishment must already be almost greater than she can bear."

But Forth was not in a humor to spare anyone. He talked so loudly and so angrily that Kenyon was obliged at last to remind him that unless he kept this affair quiet, they might be prevented fighting Sir Arthur Beaton ; and this argument had an immediate effect.

"And do not, of course, let Ruth hear anything," said Kenyon ; and Forth saw the wisdom of this advice also.

"Say we are going to town on some business," he added, "and meet me at the station at one o'clock ; we shall be able to write to him to-day."

He left a few minutes after this, and Ruth came to shake hands with him before he went away.

"I am going to take your father up to town with me for a few days, my dear," he exclaimed. "I have some affairs to settle, and shall want his help."

He was quite calm now, and Ruth never guessed his real errand. Her father asked her to pack what he required, and hurried off in time to meet Colonel Kenyon at the station as he had promised, and Ruth was left alone.

In the meanwhile the two old comrades had started on

their journey to town, and though they exchanged no further words by the way on the subject of Sir Arthur Beaton, the most resolute determination filled both their hearts. They reached town about seven o'clock, and on arriving at their hotel Colonel Forth at once, by Colonel Kenyon's wish, despatched the following letter to Sir Arthur :—

"SIR,—I am requested by Colonel Kenyon to inform you that your refusal to marry my daughter Frances, after you induced her to leave her husband's house, now when it is in your power to do so, is in his estimation, and alike in mine, so gross an insult to us both, that we are determined to call you to account for it. Will you therefore send some gentleman to me, so that I may arrange with him the time and place in France, where a hostile meeting can take place between you and Colonel Kenyon, who claims it as his right to avenge his wife's honor? Should you refuse, Colonel Kenyon or myself will publicly horsewhip you, and brand you at your club as a coward.

"WILLIAM FORTH."

Colonel Forth penned these lines with "stern joy," and the two old friends sat the rest of the evening anxiously expecting an answer. One arrived about eleven o'clock the same night, written from his club by Sir Arthur Beaton, and sent on by an especial messenger, addressed to Colonel Forth.

"SIR,—I fully admit the right of Colonel Kenyon to call me out ; and my friend Captain Brett, of the Guards, shall call upon you to-morrow morning at twelve o'clock, to arrange particulars.

"ARTHUR BEATON."

Colonel Forth read this brief note, and then handed it to Kenyon, who, having also read it, returned it without comment.

"He doesn't mean to shirk it, at all events," said Forth.

"I did not think he would, and I cannot understand his conduct," answered Kenyon, his mind wandering back to the handsome, seemingly high-minded young man who had sat so often at his table.

"There is no excuse for it," said Forth ; and then they

changed the conversation, for what more indeed was there to be said?

Two days later, on the French coast, about a mile from Calais, as the sun rose in its glory, gilding each wave and ripple of the wide green sea, shining on the yellow sands, and on "the waste and lumber of the shore," two Englishmen were standing, having gone to this lonely spot to avenge an injury to the bitter end.

And the bright beams fell on the pale, stern, haggard face of the man from whose heart Frances Forth had crushed out all hope and happiness. They fell, too, on the flushed red face of her father, who began to look uneasily at his watch, as he saw the appointed hour had come when it had been arranged that Sir Arthur Beaton and his second should meet them.

"They are two minutes past their time," he said; "I hope there is no hitch."

"Their driver might not quite know the way, perhaps," answered Colonel Kenyon, calmly, adding a moment later, "Look yonder—there they are; but they are bringing a third man—I suppose a surgeon."

Then Colonel Forth looked in the direction his friend indicated, and saw at some little distance, coming across the sands towards them, three figures whom they recognised as they drew nearer—three quite young men, and the one who was going to fight the youngest of all. Sir Arthur Beaton's tall, slender, lithe figure stood out distinct and striking in the clear morning air. He paused when a few yards distant from the elder men, and his friend Captain Brett advanced to meet Colonel Forth to make final arrangements. Sir Arthur's face looked pale, but firm and handsome; but he scarcely cared to glance across the few yards of sand which divided him from the man he had wronged, the man whose hospitality he had abused, and whose friendship he had betrayed.

He talked to the young French surgeon until his second returned to his side, and then moved quietly to the spot which was marked out as his position. A minute or two elapsed, during which Colonel Kenyon had a word to say in his old friend's ear.

"If I fall at the first shot, remember your promise to take my place."

"I am not likely to forget it," answered Forth, gloomily.

Soon everything was ready; the fatal word *Fire* was given; and as it crossed Colonel Forth's lips, Sir Arthur Beaton deliberately raised his weapon and fired into the air, and the next moment fell forward with a bullet in his breast.

His second and the surgeon ran to him, and as they did so he looked wildly up at the blue sky above, and then around him. By this time Colonel Kenyon and Colonel Forth, seeing that he was seriously wounded, also advanced to his side, and as Sir Arthur's eyes fell on the face of the grey-haired man he had injured, he made an effort to speak.

"*Forgive me!*" he said; and they were the last words of those generous, erring lips!

CHAPTER XLVI.

TOO LATE.

WHEN Frances Forth heard how fatally Colonel Kenyon had obeyed her wishes, she fell into the most violent paroxysms of grief and remorse. Even in her bitterest anger she had never thought of Arthur Beaton's *death*. He might be wounded, and she would go to him, she, perhaps, had vaguely imagined; but of yon pale handsome young face lying on the French shore with half-open glazing eyes, she had never dreamed.

And there was another, too, who read in the papers of the tragic ending to a sad story with almost intolerable pangs of remorse also. This was Major Audley. He had heard nothing of Sir Arthur Beaton since his interview with him at the sunlit villa by the Southern sea, and in Paris he read the account of the fatal duel between two Englishmen near Calais, with all its sensational details. It was a tale quite suited to French tastes, and the papers enlarged on it, and told how the lover, having refused to fulfil his promise of marrying the lady, she had absolutely gone to the husband she had forsaken and asked him to avenge her wrongs. Then Audley knew he had sent Arthur Beaton to his doom; that but for him he would

have married Frances Forth, and Colonel Kenyon's hand would not have been stained with his young blood.

It was a great shock to him; he had always liked Beaton, and the fact that he had saved him when he made the mad attempt on his own life had strongly bound him to the warm-hearted, brave, generous young soldier, whose life Frances Forth had so fatally blighted. Audley remembered, too, how devoted Beaton had been to him during his long illness at Headfort; and an intense bitterness filled his heart against Ruth, when he told himself that but for her treachery in telling Seaforth the miserable reason for her marriage, he (Audley) would never have betrayed the secret of his wife's sister, unless that wife had forfeited all claims to his forbearance. And this idea preyed so on his mind (eager perhaps to blame some other than himself for his unhappy interference between Frances Forth and Sir Arthur), that he actually determined to return to England, for the purpose of reproaching Ruth with being the true cause of Arthur Beaton's death.

Ruth had already heard from her father the sad news, which had inexpressibly shocked and grieved her. A judicial inquiry had been made into the case, but it was an affair of honor, and had been conducted with perfect fairness, and French morality was satisfied. But Colonel Kenyon and his old friend did not return to England for many weeks after the tragedy on the sands near Calais. It had in truth so painfully affected Kenyon, that on his return to his hotel in the town, he had been attacked with severe illness, and the last sad look in the dying eyes of Arthur Beaton constantly haunted him.

Thus Ruth was alone at her father's little house at Headfort, with the exception of a single maid; for the Colonel's modest income could afford no larger establishment. And one morning, about a fortnight after Arthur Beaton's death, she had sent this maid out on an errand into the village, when a ring came to the house-door bell, and imagining it was the maid, she went into the hall and opened the door, and then started violently back, pale and trembling.

For outside stood her husband! Audley had gone down to Headfort the night before, and the comments of his former brother-officers on poor Beaton's melancholy

end had yet further increased his indignation against Ruth, for having indirectly, he told himself, caused so dire a tragedy. And he made no offer of any ordinary salutation as he stood there pale and wrathful.

"I wish to speak to you," was all he said; and he entered the house without invitation, and walked into the dining-room, the door of which was standing open, and then turned round and glared at the trembling woman who had followed him.

"You did not expect to see me?" he began, bitterly.

"No, I did not," answered Ruth, in a low tone.

"I must congratulate you," went on Audley, "on all the mischief you and your sister have contrived to do in your short lives!"

Ruth did not speak; she felt half afraid of the angry man standing before her, knowing that she had no protector near.

"I suppose you know Arthur Beaton is dead? But do you know who sent him to his death?"

"You mean Frances, I suppose?" said Ruth in faltering accents.

"No, not Frances!" answered Audley, loudly and passionately, "but *you*!"

"*I*! What do you mean?" said Ruth in great surprise. "I knew nothing of Frances' visit to Sudley until he was dead; I had nothing whatever to do with it."

"Oh! had you not!" sneered Audley. "But what if I tell you that you, and you only, sent the poor fellow to his untimely end?"

"I cannot understand you; you are completely mistaken."

"Unfortunately I am not. Colonel Kenyon shot Beaton, did he not, because he refused to marry your sister after she was divorced?"

"So my father wrote to me," answered Ruth in a low, pained tone, "after it was all over."

"But do you know why he would not marry her?" continued Audley, darkly and vindictively. "He meant to do so, I assure you, until he heard the disgraceful secret that you had thought fit to confide to Captain Seaforth's ears!"

"*What*! You do not mean to say you told him——"

"Yes, I told him," interrupted Audley bitterly; "I told

him the whole story ; I went to Monte Carlo to tell him. But had you not told Seaforth, had you not acted so shamefully as you did, it never would have passed my lips."

Ruth clasped her hands together, and stood there, shocked and trembling.

"You did this?" she said. "How could you?"

"I did it to try to save the poor fellow from great dishonor ; and you had forfeited all claims upon me when you told Seaforth, otherwise I should not have interfered."

"I did not tell Captain Seaforth the whole story," said Ruth, in great distress ; "all that I told him was that you had learnt some unhappy secret of Frances, and that your price for keeping it was that I should break off my engagement with him, and marry you. And I only did this after Frances had left Colonel Kenyon. Oh ! why—why did you interfere?"

Audley was silent for a moment ; then he said, slowly—

"Is this true?"

"Quite—quite true ! You misunderstood the words which I suppose you overheard in Longridge-road. Captain Seaforth was very angry, naturally angry ; but he knew nothing—nothing of what the secret was !"

Again Audley was silent for a moment or two ; then he asked abruptly :—

"Have you seen him since then?"

"Just once ; he came to bid me good-bye before he went to India."

"Then all I can say is I wish my tongue had been cut out of my mouth before I had gone to that poor lad with this cursed story," said Audley, roughly. "You had maddened me, Ruth, and I wished to be revenged on you both, and was determined to prevent that Jezebel of a sister of yours making a good marriage after the life that she had led. Beaton meant to marry her ; he told me so—and see how it has ended, all through you !"

"Not through me," said Ruth, much affected. "But do not let us reproach each other—it's too late, and can do no good now—and if you were misled——"

"I was, curse it !"

"I am very sorry ; perhaps I may have been to blame in making any explanation to Captain Seaforth at all after I had married you."

"I told

"To blame ! Of course you were to blame."

"Let it rest so then ; I have lived much alone lately, and have begun to think more than I did—you see I was very young when we were married—and I had cared very much for Kenard Seaforth."

"You need not tell me," said Audley, turning away his head.

"Let that be my excuse then ; we made a great mistake to marry, and it was sure to end unhappily ; but we need not make it worse by speaking and feeling bitterly to each other now when it is all ended."

Audley stared gloomily at Ruth as she said this, and her manner, so different to what it used to be, surprised him.

"You mean to live on here, then ?" he said a moment later.

"Yes, you see the house is cheap, and as my father is poor it suits him."

"You need not reproach me with being poor at any rate ! That is your own fault ; it is certainly my wish to provide you with a proper income."

"It is very good of you, but we have quite enough. And," she added with a smile, "I make a little money now by writing stories."

"Absurd folly !"

"Oh ! no, indeed it is not ; it gives me pocket-money, and keeps me from thinking."

She was looking very pretty, just like the fair young girl that Audley had first seen and loved in this very place. And as he looked at her a softer feeling towards her stole into his heart than he had ever felt since he believed she had told Seaforth the whole story of their marriage.

"Are you quite well now ?" she asked a moment later.

"As well as I shall ever be, I suppose ; but this con-founded leg of mine often pains me."

"You are standing. Won't you sit down ?"

He sat down, still looking at Ruth ; wondering what had changed her so, and made her whole manner and the expression of her face so much gentler and more composed than they used to be.

"Is your father at home ?" he asked.

"No ; he is with poor Colonel Kenyon, you know."

"Your life must be fairly lonely then. Do you ever see any of the people about ?"

Ruth shook her head.

"I go nowhere," she said.

"Then what on earth do you do with yourself?"

Again Ruth smiled.

"I find plenty to do," she answered.

"At all events in future I hope you will accept a decent income from me?"

"No; you must not ask me to do that."

"You hate me too much, I suppose?" asked Audley, with some bitterness.

"It is not that—but our lives are parted—and I could not bear to take your money."

"You are an extraordinary girl!"

"Perhaps I am; you see living in a place like this one wants so little money."

"Some women are always wanting it."

"Well, I do not; at least not much."

Once more Audley was silent for a few moments. He had gone there with the bitterest feelings in his heart against Ruth, but her sweet girlish face, her grave gentle manner, and perhaps the knowledge that she had only seen Seaforth once since she had left his roof, and that he was now in India, and that Ruth had only at least partially confided in him, naturally influenced Audley, who sat down with downcast eyes, and with a sort of sullen shame of his own conduct gradually stealing over him.

Suddenly he rose.

"Well, it's no use saying any more about it, I suppose," he said; "I am both glad and sorry to have heard what you told me—good day!"

He did not put out his hand, but left the room as quickly as he could in his disabled condition, and Ruth watched him go, and then tried to return to her usual morning's work, with a very restless and uneasy heart.

Had she been to blame—indirectly to blame, for poor Arthur Beaton's death? she thought. By one of those subtle undercurrents which affect so strangely the upper surface of our lives, she had unconsciously helped to send the young man to his untimely doom, and the idea was inexpressibly painful to her.

In the meanwhile Audley had returned to the Fort, for he had taken up his abode at his old quarters during his brief visit to Headfort, and he went there now also in a

very disturbed and dissatisfied condition of mind. He unhappily had contracted a habit of drinking deeply of late, and to dull his feelings of remorse and self-blame, he at once called for brandy, and while he was half-stupefying himself, Major Cary, who was an old friend of his, came into his rooms to see him.

They talked of various things, and at last Audley, with some hesitation of manner, asked Major Cary if he ever saw his wife.

"Of course, you know, we are separated?" he added.

"I have heard so," answered Cary, casting down his eyes. "No, I never see Mrs. Audley, or at least very rarely; but I often hear of her."

"Hear of her?" said Audley, sharply, and with a jealous pang darting through his heart. "How, and what do you hear about her?"

"Well, the truth is, Audley, your wife is so very good to the poor people of the village that one cannot fail to hear of her. One of our married men lives somewhere in the back streets here, and he tells me Mrs. Audley spends her time in doing good, and helping anyone who wants help."

"Is this so?" said Audley, uneasily.

"It is an undoubted fact; this man's wife has been a great invalid for a long time, and Mrs. Audley has been very kind to her; indeed they look upon her as a sort of ministering angel, and this Jackson speaks of her with the deepest gratitude."

"I remember the man," said Audley, slowly, and then he changed the conversation. But after Major Cary left him, his mind instantly reverted to what he had been told, and he began to feel completely ashamed of the manner in which he had acted to Ruth.

"I suppose she will never forgive me," he thought moodily; "it's been a bad business from beginning to end, and that cursed woman Jezebel has done all the mischief."

He was very restless the next day, wandering out and in the Fort, and past the old house in High Street many times, unable to make up his mind. He wished to see Ruth again, and yet was conscious that he had forfeited all right to force himself into her presence. And as he was walking up the street with bent head and frowning brow, somewhat

to his annoyance, he chanced to encounter his old friend Lady Hastings, who had heard from one of her new admirers that he was at the Fort, and had driven into Headfort in the hope of meeting him.

She pulled up her ponies, and handed the reins to the groom the moment she saw him, and sprang lightly out of the carriage.

"I am so glad to have met you," she said in her pretty gushing way, as she clasped his hand; "I heard you were here, and I want you to come over and dine with us."

But Audley was in no mood to amuse himself with Lady Hastings.

"You are very good," he said, "but I am only here for a day or so, and have not time to go anywhere."

"But you will surely come to *us*?" she continued, looking up in his face with her brown eyes. "Of course I know it must be most painful for you to be here—most trying!"

"Why?" asked Audley abruptly, and he frowned.

"Ah, I know!" answered Lady Hastings with a commiserating sigh. "I met her once in the street here after you had sent her away from your house, and I felt so uncomfortable; of course, I could not bow when I had been such a great friend of yours."

"To whom do you allude?" said Audley, his disfigured face turning scarlet with sudden anger.

"Well—of course, I mean Mrs. Audley," replied Lady Hastings, who began to perceive she had touched on a peculiarly unwelcome subject.

"Then you have been misinformed; I did not send my wife away from my house, and had never any intention of doing so. We had a quarrel and she left of her own accord, and came down here to her father's."

"Perhaps you will become friends again, then," said Lady Hastings, smiling, and trying to make the best of an awkward situation. "I always said she was very pretty."

"That is a matter of taste, you know," answered Audley, stiffly. "But you will excuse me, I am sure, Lady Hastings, if I say good morning, as I am in haste."

The little woman smiled, nodded, and was handed back into her pony carriage, and drove away, feeling not a little uncomfortable. But her words, after a few minutes consideration, had determined Audley how to act.

"I ought to go and tell her what that little chattering fool said," he mentally decided; "and what construction is put upon her living here."

And he carried this resolve into effect an hour later. He walked to Colonel Forth's house, and when he reached it he found Ruth in the garden gathering some flowers. She did not see him until the sound of the gate opening caused her to look round, and then a sudden flush passed over her face.

She was dressed in white, and her head was uncovered, and she walked slowly forward to meet him, and, after a moment's hesitation, Audley held out his hand, and for an instant Ruth's uncovered palm touched his.

"Are you making a bouquet?" he said nervously. "I—have a few words to say to you. May I go into the house?"

"Yes," answered Ruth, also nervously. His manner was very different to what it had been the day before, and Ruth instantly saw this.

They went into the dining-room together, and after Audley had shut the door he looked at Ruth very earnestly.

"Ruth," he began, I have been thinking things over since I saw you, and I'll admit I've been to blame—I was mistaken, and I am very sorry that in my great anger I struck you that blow."

She raised her grey, sad, gentle eyes to his face, but did not speak.

"Will you forgive me? I am very sorry about it," said Audley, with an effort.

"I quite forgive you. Do not speak of it any more," she answered in a low tone.

"Then—as you left me for that, I suppose—if you have forgiven me, why can't we become friends again?"

"It was not alone for that," said Ruth, looking down.

"Suppose we both try to forget past worries and causes of offence? I have been hearing of your life here, and what a good little woman you are, Ruth," and he smiled, "and I have come to the conclusion that I have been very much to blame. I was jealous of Seaforth, I suppose, and that made me such a bear."

"All that is past and over now, and I am glad, at least, that we shall part in peace."

"But why part? I am ready to forget and forgive everything, if you are. And there is one thing I think you ought to consider, and that is what people say. You are a pretty young woman, living apart from her husband, and the world is very apt to put the worst construction on such a position."

"I know it is."

"Well, will you end it, then? Will you go back with me to town, and let us try in future to lead different lives?"

But Ruth shook her head.

"It cannot be," she said.

"But why?" urged Audley.

"Because I never loved you as a woman should love her husband," answered Ruth with much agitation, "we --are happier apart."

"Well, if you think this ——"

"I do think it—I know it," continued Ruth, as Audley paused, "there can be no happiness where there is not love—and we cannot make love either come or go."

Her voice broke and faltered as she said the last few words, and Audley understood, understood that her heart was still true to the man from whom he had parted her.

"I shall say no more then," he said hoarsely and abruptly, for he was greatly disappointed. "Good-bye," and they shook hands, and he went away.

CHAPTER XLVII.

PASSING AWAY.

Two years passed away after this quiet parting between Ruth and Audley at Headfort, and noiseless Time strode on, marking its silent way on every living thing: To Ruth Audley, the sun-risings and sun-sets, the seed-times and harvests, brought seemingly no outward change. She still lived with her father; still cherished the strong affection she had given to the lover of her girlhood; but her character ripened and colored, as fruit in the autumn sun.

Even her father recognised this, and Ruth's influence over him grew and grew. He saw a handsome young

woman, who thought more of the comforts of others than her own; who dressed plainly, so as to be able to feed the hungry; and who bore his own little outbursts of irritability with patience and good humor.

"She is a good girl," he many a time told the sad-faced, white-haired man who lived at Sudley. For Colonel Kenyon had grown old before his time; and poor Arthur Beaton's death, and his dying act and words, were never forgotten.

And the woman who had once been his wife—Frances Forth—what change had the changing seasons brought to her? After the first shock was over—the first wild cries stilled, and the tears dried that she had shed over her young lover's fate, Frances began to remember that she was still lovely, and that the world—a shady one, perhaps—was still before her. And with the simple generosity and nobleness of his character, Colonel Kenyon provided her with an income which was sufficient for her to live on.

"I shall settle five hundred a year on her for her life," he told her father, "on one condition, which is that she never attempts to see me."

Thus Frances was placed above anxiety as regards her means of living, and made no scruple about accepting the money of the man she had so greatly wronged. She took apartments in Paris, and first called herself Lady Beaton, vainly hoping that the fact that she had never been married to Sir Arthur might not be exactly known.

But from this dream she was roused by receiving a stern letter from the real Lady Beaton's lawyer, requesting her not to assume a title to which she had no right. She dropped "Lady Beaton" therefore, and called herself Madame de Vaubert, and, as such, lived a reckless, careless life, spending more money than she could afford, and seeking pleasure as a child pursues the butterfly on wing.

And, about a year after Sir Arthur Beaton's death, she married again. Her choice was a most unfortunate one. It was not her somewhat waned beauty which attracted the good-looking spendthrift to her side, to whom she gave her hand, but the knowledge of her small but settled income. This Count de Laguerre, as he called himself, though his name appeared not in the "*Almanach de Gotha*," was a ruined man when he first looked on the fair Englishwoman, about whom there were many whispered scandals.

She was known to be a divorced wife, and the story of the tragic duel near Calais was not forgotten. But she was handsome, and had money, and Count de Laguerre was in such an impoverished condition, he told himself, he could not afford to be particular. And Frances married, partly because he was a good-looking man, and partly because, she thought, it would give her a more assured position.

But a terrible awakening followed. She found his position was an assumed one, and that he was a drunkard and a gambler, and that what he most prized was the quarterly cheque which she received from England. It was a wretched marriage, and they drifted lower and lower, sinking into an abyss of debt from which they never escaped. The natural consequences followed, and abuse and recrimination were of daily occurrence in the cheap, gaudily-furnished apartments, where these two dragged out an unhappy existence.

They had lived together about a year when the Count contracted typhus fever, and died after a short illness. Frances, true to her character, made no moan over a loss which she did not consider one. She buried the poor man, and put on her crape, feeling she had had a good riddance. But the subtle germs of disease had stolen into her frame also, and to her terror and consternation she felt herself growing ill.

She had always been strong, and she struggled against the insidious foe, and went out when she ought to have been in bed. But do what she would, the fever kept possession of her, and fear began to steal into her heart, for she felt herself alone in a city where she had no friend.

She grew worse and worse, and her doctor asked her if she had no relations she would like to have near her in her sickness. Then Frances remembered Ruth, and how when she had been a young girl, her then child-sister had nursed and waited on her. She remembered, too, how Ruth had nursed her during another illness which she had never until now cared to think of.

"I have a sister," she told the doctor: "but we have quarrelled."

"Still, madame, in illness quarrels are often forgotten and forgiven. May I send for your sister?"

Frances hesitated, not from any fear of giving infection

to Ruth, but from a feeling of pride and shame that Ruth should see her brought down so low. But the doctor urged it, and finally Frances gave her consent, and also gave the doctor Ruth's address at Headfort.

They had heard there of Frances' second marriage, but no direct communication had passed between the sisters during the two years and six months which had glided away since Frances had fled from her home at Sudley. But after Audley's interviews with Ruth, and his hard words to her on the subject of Arthur Beaton's death, Ruth had begun to think more tenderly of Frances—to pity her, in fact, for the terrible retribution which had overtaken her when her young lover died.

And rumors reached them that her second marriage was also an unfortunate one, and Ruth would often muse sadly enough over her beautiful sister's fate. But she never talked of Frances to her father, as her name was sufficient to put Colonel Forth into a tremendous rage. He could not forget the pain and misery she had caused, and the shadowed life of his old friend was an ever present grievance.

The letter, therefore, from the French doctor, which duly arrived, was a great shock to Ruth. He informed her that Madame de Laguerre, her sister, was dangerously ill of typhus fever, and though the form which the disease had hitherto assumed was not of so fatal a nature as that which had carried off her husband, after a brief illness, still it was of a sufficiently alarming character to induce the doctor to wish that some of Madame's near relatives should be by her bed-side. And he ended by urging Ruth to go to Paris as quickly as possible.

Ruth received this letter at breakfast time, read it, and laid it down with a little cry.

"Oh! father," she said, "Frances is very ill."

"Frances!" answered the Colonel, with an ominous frown.

"Yes," said Ruth with agitation; "this is a letter from her doctor; she has typhus fever, he says, and that her husband has died of it, and that some of her relations should be with her—I will go."

"Ruth," said Colonel Forth starting to his feet, "you shall do nothing of the kind! I forbid it—do you hear?"

"But father I must go; I could not bear to think of it

if I did not—fancy, when she is so ill, to be all alone !”

“She has forfeited all claims on our consideration, and I am not going to let you run the risk of catching an infectious fever for the sake of one who has ceased to be anything to us ; most justly ceased !”

“But that cannot be, you know,” said Ruth, also rising ; “if Frances had been prosperous and well it might have been different, but now when she is so ill and a widow, we cannot forget what she once was to us—at least I cannot. You will give me the money to go to Paris, father, will you not ?”

“Not one penny !” answered the Colonel in a loud, angry voice. “I repeat, I forbid you to go, and so there’s an end of it ;” and he walked out of the room to escape further solicitation.

But Ruth had made up her mind. Many a time she had secretly blamed herself for that partial explanation that she had made to Seaforth, which had brought indirectly such dire consequence to Frances, and she was not going to forsake her now. She thought a moment ; then went upstairs, and dressed herself for going out, and without again seeking her father, left the house, engaged a cab, and drove straight to Sudley, for she meant to ask Colonel Kenyon for the money to take her to Frances’ sick-bed.

It was a fine frosty morning in the early days of the new year, just two years and six months after she had gone, on such a morning, to tell Colonel Kenyon the miserable story that had wrecked his life. And now to speak of Frances was again her errand, but this time the news was very different.

She found him walking slowly up and down the terrace, in the sun, and when he saw her he at once advanced to meet her.

She shook hands with him gravely, and something in the expression of her face startled him.

“Has anything happened ?” he asked nervously.

“Yes, Frances is very ill,” answered Ruth, in a low tone ; “and I have come to ask you to advance me the money to go to her, as my father will not give it to me.”

“Very ill ?” repeated Colonel Kenyon, as though the news was a shock to him also.

“It is typhus fever ; this is the doctor’s letter ; her husband is dead, you see—I must go to her.”

Colonel Kenyon took the letter in his hand, which trembled in spite of himself, and read what the doctor had written. Then he looked at Ruth.

"And you wish to go to her?" he said.

"I shall certainly go to her; will you lend me the money, Colonel Kenyon?"

"My dear, why do you ask? But you cannot go alone—will your father not go with you?"

"He won't hear of my going; that's why I came to you."

"Then I will take you; when can we start?"

"Oh! to-day," said Ruth, eagerly. "How good of you to go—but you are always good!" And she caught hold of his hand and held it in her own, while tears rushed into her eyes as she remembered all the misery that Frances had caused this generous man, who was ready to go to her in her hour of need.

And the two started the same day for Paris, in spite of Colonel Forth's repeated remonstrances. But he also was not a little touched by his old friend's self-sacrifice.

"You are the best fellow in the world, Kenyon, that's about the truth," he muttered, as he parted with them at the station, where he finally condescended to accompany them. "Look after Ruth here, and if *she* takes ill, please send for me."

They travelled as quickly as possible, and when they found themselves in Paris, for the first time since they had started Colonel Kenyon again mentioned Frances' name.

"Do not tell Frances I am here, my dear," he said, quietly; "I shall take rooms in an hotel close to her apartments, and I shall call for you every day and take you for a drive or a walk; we must not have you fall ill."

"We shall see how she is," answered Ruth, who was visibly affected at the prospect of again seeing the once dearly loved sister from whom she had been parted so long, and whom she had last seen in such different circumstances. They were on the way to Frances' apartments when this conversation took place, and half an hour later they reached the shabby quarter where they were situated.

"What! here?" said Colonel Kenyon, in surprise, as their driver stopped. "You will want money, Ruth," and he put a considerable sum into her hand; "I shall call

again in an hour, and you must tell me how she is and what the doctor thinks of her."

He handed Ruth out of the carriage as he spoke, and a few moments later Ruth found herself entering the little suite of rooms where her unhappy sister lived. She passed through the shabby, yet gaudily-furnished reception-room, to the small, close bedroom at its back, and here she again saw Frances.

She saw a woman with a haggard, fever-wasted face, a woman who looked no longer young nor beautiful, whose features seemed to have altered somehow, and whose long chestnut hair lay disordered, dull, on the soiled pillows. Ruth advanced noiselessly close to the bed, and for a moment or two thought she had made a mistake—this could not be Frances—but as she stood shocked, uncertain, the sick woman signed restlessly, opened her large hazel eyes, and instantly a gleam of recognition shot into them.

"*Ruth!* Is it Ruth?" she said, and held out her hand, which Ruth first clasped, and then kissed the burning palm.

"I have come to nurse you," faltered Ruth, and tears she could not suppress rushed into her eyes.

"I have been very ill, but I am better," said Frances in a weak, hoarse voice, but she was perfectly conscious. "When did you come?" she continued. "I am glad you have come; what I want is nursing; they neglect me here."

"I shall take care of you; I have brought plenty of money; you can have everything you require."

"That is good news," said the invalid. "And how is——" and then her mind seemed to wander a little through excessive weakness. "I forget names sometimes," she added, as if apologetically.

"Do you mean our father?" said Ruth in a low tone.

"Yes, to be sure, our father—and the old man at Sudley. Ah!" and she suddenly raised herself up in bed, the whole tragedy of her life flashing back to her weakened and sometimes clouded brain, "why did you do it, Ruth? Do you know what you did? You sent poor Arthur Beaton to his grave."

"No, no. Oh, no!"

"Yes, but it was so," went on Frances, her eyes gleaming wildly. "That wretch, Audley, came to Monte Carlo to tell Arthur of the little babe born dead before its time that you buried by the sea. And do you know why he did

this? To revenge himself on you for telling the story to Seaforth. I thought you would have died before you would have let the secret pass your lips."

"I did not tell the secret," said Ruth with deep emotion; "I told Kenard Seaforth that Major Audley had discovered something against you, and that he threatened to tell Colonel Kenyon unless I married him; but that was all. But do not let us talk of the past, Frances; it will excite you and make you worse. Try to forget all this."

"But how can I forget it?" continued Frances, excitedly. "I heard of his death—Arthur's death—and I had killed him!" And she burst into loud and hysterical weeping, and it was more than half an hour before she sank back, too utterly exhausted to make any further wail.

This painful scene increased the fever that was consuming her, and all night Ruth sat by her bedside, while she raved of their girlish days in India and of *Walter Greville*, a name which for years had never passed her lips. Colonel Kenyon called during the evening, but Ruth had only sad news to give him. Frances was very ill, and the "old man," as she had called him, went away from her apartments with a bowed head and a heavy heart. But the next day she was a little better, and so on. Sometimes she was perfectly conscious, and at others her mind wandered and the fever ran very high. They called in a second doctor, and everything that money could procure was lavished on her, and she always herself spoke of getting well. Colonel Kenyon insisted upon Ruth leaving her occasionally, when a trained nurse took her place, and the doctors also said it was absolutely essential that Ruth should have some fresh air every day.

Colonel Kenyon used to take Ruth out for drives, and one day she noticed that his face looked graver even than usual. Frances was a shade better that day, the doctors had decided, and as they drove along together, he suddenly turned round and looked at her.

"Ruth, my dear, I have something to tell you," he said, gently.

"What is it?" said Ruth, with quick alarm. "There is nothing wrong with my father, I hope?"

"No, your father is all right, for I heard from him this morning. But yesterday, on the Boulevards, I met someone you once knew."

A sudden flush passed over Ruth's face, for in a moment she thought of Kenard Seaforth.

"Who was it?" she asked, in a faltering voice.

"It was Major Audley," answered Colonel Kenyon, turning away his head. "He was in a Bath-chair, and looked extremely ill; he has had a stroke of paralysis, he told me, and one side is completely paralysed."

"How dreadful!" said Ruth, in a low, shocked tone.

"I recognized him, and stopped to speak to him," continued Colonel Kenyon, "and I told him you were in Paris, and—the sad cause—and he expressed a strong wish to see you again."

"Would that do any good?" faltered Ruth.

"My dear, I think it would be only right. Whatever were your reasons for leaving him, I think now, in his state of health, they should be forgotten."

Ruth clasped her hands together; the idea of seeing Audley again was eminently painful to her, and yet it seemed almost impossible to her to refuse.

"If he wishes it——" she said with hesitation.

"He does wish it, and I promised to tell you of his wish."

"I will go then."

"Will you go to-day?"

But Ruth shrank back.

"I will go to-morrow," she said; "by that time I shall be more accustomed to the thought of meeting him."

But it was difficult to realize it. In the two years which had passed since she had seen Audley he had grown very shadowy and indistinct to her mind. She had tried never to think of him, in fact, for his remembrance was only pain, and to see him again she felt would make the old wounds bleed anew.

She returned therefore to Frances' bedside feeling restless and disturbed in no ordinary degree. Colonel Kenyon had arranged to take her the next day to see Audley, but of course she said nothing of this to Frances, who seemed a little better than usual when she returned.

And on the following afternoon she did go to see the stricken man. Ever since his accident Major Audley had drunk an inordinate quantity of brandy, and his intemperance the doctors believed had brought on the paralysis from which he was suffering. He was a melancholy spec-

tacle, the whole of the left side of his body being affected, and this, coupled with the fact of the loss of his right leg, made him almost entirely powerless.

He was sitting propped up in an easy-chair, when Colonel Kenyon led Ruth into his room; and when she saw the shattered wreck before her, she was much shocked and overcome. She went up to him, and took one of his cold stiff hands in hers.

"You have been ill?" she said pityingly.

"I am ill, you mean," he answered with something of his old manner; "I am a useless log, Ruth; not fit any longer to cumber the earth."

"Oh! do not say that."

"It's about the truth, at all events," he continued. "And so you are in Paris to nurse——"

But Ruth gave a warning gesture, and looked round at Colonel Kenyon, who walked to the window, not caring to watch this strange meeting between the husband and wife.

"Ruth, my dear," said Colonel Kenyon, the next moment, "I'll go now, and call for you in half-an-hour; Major Audley may wish to talk to you a little while."

Ruth would fain have bid him stay, but in Audley's terrible condition it seemed impossible to say anything that might seem as a slight to him. So Colonel Kenyon went away, and Ruth was alone with Audley.

He was silent for a moment; he looked at her earnestly—at this girl-wife with her fair face, who had never loved him, and then he gave a restless sigh.

"I am glad to see you again," he said; "I have thought more than once since this confounded paralysis has overtaken me of asking you to come—but I suppose you would not have liked that?"

"If I could have done you any good," hesitated Ruth, with downcast eyes.

"Well, for the matter of that, no one can do me any good; but you could have taken care of me, you know, until you are a widow."

"I wish you would not talk thus."

"Very well, I won't then. I was so astonished to see old Kenyon yesterday; so astonished, that for a moment I forgot all about poor Beaton's death," and his brow darkened, "though, for the matter of that, he only did what I

myself would have done under the circumstances. But at all events I forgot the poor lad, and only remembered I might hear something of you."

"You know Frances is very ill?"

"So he told me; and is it very safe for you to nurse a woman ill of typhus fever?"

"I am very, very glad I came; I hope she is going to get better now."

"You are a good little woman, Ruth."

"No, no, indeed."

"And if madame whatever her name is—she will always be Jezebel to me, you know—gets well, do you think you will come and nurse me for a little bit?"

"If you wish it, yes."

"Thank you; I do wish it. And now tell me how your father is, and all the news."

She sat with him for half an hour, and then Colonel Kenyon returned for her, and they went away; but not until she had promised to return. But on the following day Frances was worse, and it was impossible for Ruth to leave her.

Of the next few days in that darkened sick-room it is painful to write. Fatal symptoms set in, and the doctors told Ruth plainly there was no hope. And it was terrible to Ruth to know that Frances was perfectly unconscious of her danger. She talked of getting well when she talked at all; and at last, trembling, white-lipped, Ruth spoke to her of the great change she knew was near.

"What do you mean?" said Frances quickly, a startled look coming on her haggard face. "Please, Ruth, do not begin to preach."

"But my dear, my dear," said Ruth, bursting into a sudden passion of tears, and sinking on her knees by the bedside; "the doctors do not think you are improving—they think——"

"Not that I am going to die!" cried Frances in terror.

"I will not die—I dare not die—don't for Heaven's sake speak of it again, Ruth!"

"At least let us pray together," wept Ruth. "Oh, my dear, think how good God is. Let us ask Him to forgive us all our sins!"

But Frances would not listen.

"I do not see how we have been very much worse than

other people," she said; "please let me alone, Ruth, I want to try to sleep."

Alas! in the fitful sleep that followed, each moment brought her nearer to the long sleep that has no wakening. And as the gathering shades of evening stole over the gay and busy world outside, so did the gathering shades of death creep nearer and nearer to the vain, restless heart, who had done not good but evil all her days!

And as the hours wore on, even Frances began to fear, began to realise that the new and strange sensations which overwhelmed her might mean the unseen shadow from which there is no escape. Her terror then became pitiable to behold. It was terrible to see this reluctant soul—conscious, terrified—drifting into darkness, clinging to life, vainly fighting with the grim foe!

She died at daybreak, but, for some hours before her death, she lay in a state of semi-sensibility, while Ruth knelt by her side, praying audibly, and holding fast the poor hands in which the pulses were sinking lower and lower. At last the end came; there was a shudder, a brief struggle, and beautiful Frances Forth was dead.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

NOT VERY POOR.

RUTH'S grief was deep and bitter when they told her that Frances had really passed away. And as she wept and wailed, there came another mourner—seemingly an old man—who stood gazing, with dry eyes and haggard face, at the changed features he remembered in their lovely prime. This was Colonel Kenyon, who, as he knew the end was drawing near, had gone to the house where Frances lay dying. All night he had waited, sleepless, moved to the very soul by the knowledge of the mortal struggle going on in the chamber above where he sat, pale and rigid, hiding as best he could the strong emotions surging in his breast.

Then at daybreak they came and told him Madame was at rest—that it was all over; and Colonel Kenyon rose up

and went to look on the face of the dead woman who had once been his wife. Long he stood there, thinking thoughts none knew, for he spoke no words. He scarcely indeed seemed to see the weeping sister, still kneeling with bowed head by the bedside. But suddenly he roused himself from that silent depth of memory and of woe. He turned his eyes away from the haggard face on the pillows and looked at Ruth, and the next moment laid his hand on her shoulder.

"Come with me, my dear," he said. "You can do no further good now." And he raised her to her feet as he spoke.

Ruth wished to remain, but Colonel Kenyon was firm.

"It is my duty to take you away," he said; and Ruth, worn with watching and mental suffering, yielded, and after one long last look at her once beautiful sister's face, allowed herself to be led from the room.

Ruth was very ill during the next few days; so ill that Colonel Kenyon telegraphed for her father, and Colonel Forth arrived in time to follow his eldest daughter to her grave, though at first he refused to do so. But Colonel Kenyon wished it, and he was ashamed to refuse.

"Let us only remember what she once was to us both," said Colonel Kenyon. And so the two old friends saw her laid in her last resting-place, after her brief, unquiet life.

Major Audley had sent to inquire many times during the last few days of Frances' illness, and showed real anxiety about Ruth's condition. They took her from the house where Frances had died as soon as it was possible, and after a little while, after the first shock was softened, she began to recover, and, to the great relief of her father and Colonel Kenyon, showed no symptoms of infection, which she might have so easily contracted by her constant attendance on Frances.

Then Colonel Forth began to talk of taking her home, but Ruth said very little. She asked Colonel Kenyon very quietly one day to take her to see Audley, and when she entered his room in her deep mourning, she could not at first suppress her tears.

"Come, you must not break down," said Audley, who was not unmoved.

"No; but it was so dreadful," wept Ruth.

They were alone, for Colonel Kenyon had only escorted

her to the door of the house, where Audley had a small suite of rooms ; and after a few moments' silence, after a slight hesitation, Audley asked her to remain with him.

"I know it is a selfish thing to do," he said, "but it won't be for long, Ruth."

"Would it make you happier?" asked Ruth gently, fixing her eyes, full of pity, on his face. "Are you sure you would like me to be with you?"

"I am quite sure ; I always liked you, you know, poor little woman."

"Perhaps I can be some little help to you ; I think you should have a woman with you—if you wish it, I will stay."

So they settled it, and to the surprise and strong indignation of Colonel Forth, Ruth told him when she returned to their hotel that she was going to remain in Paris with her husband.

"With that fellow? After he struck you?" said the Colonel, angrily.

"He will not strike me any more," answered Ruth gently, "poor fellow, he cannot lift his hand."

"But to spend your life with a helpless cripple ! Just think what it will be, before you determine on such a sacrifice."

"I think it is my duty ; he has no one to look after him, and I feel sure I am doing right," said Ruth earnestly ; and nothing her father could say could move her from her purpose.

"I think she is right," answered Colonel Kenyon quietly, when Colonel Forth appealed to him on the subject ; and so, exceedingly sore and annoyed at the idea of losing the company of his daughter when he had become so accustomed to it, Colonel Forth at length returned to his little house at Headfort alone.

That Ruth's new life was a painful trial to her it would be useless to deny. But she was of a very pitiful and womanly nature, and Audley was such a great sufferer that it soon became easy and natural to her to tend, and try to cheer him. She wrote and told Kenard Seaforth out in India what she had done.

"I am sure if you saw him, dear Kenard, you would say I had done right—and he is so much more patient than he used to be ;" she wrote to her old friend. "I read to

him, and write his letters ; and he was so very lonely, and his life is so very sad, that I am glad that I am able to be with him ; " and so on.

It went on for nine months longer, and Ruth made a devoted nurse, and the end came very suddenly and quietly. Major Audley had already had two paralytic attacks when Ruth returned to him, and he died when the third seized him, never regaining speech nor consciousness. He had seemed unusually well the day before, and had spoken very gratefully to Ruth.

"When I die, my dear," he had said, "you will know how well I have appreciated all your kindness."

Ruth telegraphed to her father, and the Colonel lost no time in hastening to her assistance. But imagine his delight when, after poor Audley was buried, he received a letter from Audley's lawyers, to inform him that the late Major Audley had some months ago executed a will in favor of his wife, and by it had left her his entire fortune, completely in her own control. The fortune was a substantial one, for since his sister's death Audley had had an income of over two thousand a year ; and Ruth thus found herself almost a rich woman, and understood now what the poor fellow had meant when he told her she would know some day how well he had appreciated all her kindness.

Colonel Forth's elation was so great, he could scarcely keep it within the bounds of decency.

"They'll not show you the cold shoulder *now* at Headfort, Ruth," he said, proudly ; but Ruth only smiled, and then went to her own room, and sat down thinking softly of some one who was far away.

And the next day she went out quietly and alone, and posted a newspaper, in which she had marked the announcement of Major Audley's death. And then she watched and waited for the letter she hoped this news would bring.

It came by the first Indian mail, after Kenard Seaforth knew that the man was dead who had separated him from his young love. Shall we read it with her? Read the warm and tender words in which he told her that his heart had never changed ; that he would return to England immediately, and that he prayed God that this time nothing would separate them?

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And he came ; and these two, who had loved each other so truly, met again, and clasped each other's hands in silent joy. Seaforth looked browner, and older, but he told Ruth that in her fair face he saw no change.

"And my darling," he said after a little while, "will you go back to India with me at once?"

"Must that be?" she asked softly.

"Well, you see we won't have very much money, and I think for a year or two it would be more prudent."

Ruth smiled.

"But I am not very poor now," she said ; and when Seaforth heard of her fortune, with excusable exaggeration he declared he would have liked her better without it !

But his parents were by no means of this opinion. Kenard judiciously told the amount of Ruth's income, when he wrote to the General to tell him of his renewed engagement, and the General carried the letter to his wife, with a smile on his usually somewhat stern countenance.

"Well, your boy has got his own way at last, it seems," he said ; "and as that other wretched woman is dead, and this one we always heard highly spoken of, I think he has done very well."

"And he was always so fond of her," said the mother a little tremulously.

"That's all very fine, but you can't live on love now-a-days, and I am glad for one that she's a good income ; and I have no doubt so is he—or will be."

THE END.

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